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ARKANSAS KIT;

OR,

THE RIVER SPRITE'S CHOICE.

A TALE OF THE CROWFOOT COUNTRY.

BY W. J. HAMILTON,

AUTHOR OF THE FOLLOWING DIME NOVELS:

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ARKANSAS KIT.

CHAPTER I.

AN UNLUCKY SHOT.

A CANOE containing two persons was floating lazily upon one of our great Western rivers, a tributary of the Arkansas.

The one who sat in the stern was a hunter, whose garb was the buck-skin of the border; the other was a man who evidently had spent a great portion of his life in cities. He was about the middle size, neatly and compactly built, with a reserve of muscle seldom given to men of sedentary pursuits. He was seated lazily in the bow of the canoe, with a rifle across his knees, turning his dark eyes toward either bank, as the canoe slipped along under strokes of the paddle in the hands of the hunter. His face was a good one; his hair dark and waving, and his hands and feet small and shapely. His garments were of coarse, strong stuff, suitable for his present border life.

This was Richard Weston, generally called "Dick" by his friends, who had been driven by sheer *ennui* to seek for change in the mountains and plains of the West.

His companion was a man who might have been thirty years of age, the *beau ideal* of a borderman and scout. He was nearly six feet in height, but a slight stoop gave him the appearance of being shorter. His face was handsome, and he wore the pointed beard and mustache affected by bordermen at this day. The arms which grasped the paddle were of wonderful length, so that, when he stood erect, the extended fingers almost touched his knee. There was an air of reckless good-nature upon his brown face, to which a piercing gray eye added an expression of desperate bravery. Such was Kit Hammond, the prince of Arkansas rangers, scouts and trappers.

"Any Indians about here, Kit?" demanded Dick, shifting the rifle which lay across his knee to a more easy position.

"Heaps," replied Kit, sententiously; "heaps an' slashin' of 'em."

"What tribe are they?"

"Crowfoot," replied Kit; "and look yer—them Crowfoot ar' pizen of the meanest kind. I don't mean to say they ar' anyways likely to meddle with you ef they ar' let alone, but you step on the'r corns, an' darn my buttons—they'll mount ye ez a June bug is mounted by a hawk. Them's my sentiments, prezactly."

"There is no reason for us to interfere with them, that I can see," replied Dick. "I wish we could meet some of them."

"I don't. I ain't anyway parshull to Crowfoot, sence the day they killed my pard over yender. He was a rusher—was old Jim Selleck—oh, he *was* a bu'ster! Why, Dick—'sense the familiar name—you would hev *loved* that man. He could hev cleaned out half a dozen Injuns so quick that every ha'r would be lifted before you had time to wink thrice."

"Draw it mild, Kit."

"Juss so; I will. But he was a snorter—darn every button on my shirt ef he wa'n't."

"If he had not been a good man, he would not have suited you. Ha—look at that!"

A stately buck, parting the bushes upon the bank, had come down to the river to drink. Quick as thought, Dick brought his rifle to the shoulder, the sharp crack sounded along the river, and the buck staggered; thinking that he would escape, Weston fired again, just as the buck fell, while the bullet whizzed over him. But it found a victim, for a cry of agony was heard from the bushes in the rear, and both men started and looked at each other in dismay.

"Thunder!" said Kit. "What was that? By jinks, Dick, I'm mortal afeard you've hit suthin' 'sides deer-meat, that last shot."

"Let us go ashore," cried Dick, anxiously. "It might be one of the boys."

Kit whirled the head of the canoe toward the bank, and a

few rapid strokes brought them to the landing-place, near the body of the deer, which lay dead upon the long reeds along the waterside. Without waiting to look at the game, Dick Weston darted up the bank, closely followed by Hammond, and they looked anxiously in the direction from which the cry had come, but nothing was in sight. Dick shouted aloud, and a deep groan answered, coming from the bushes, a few yards away. Both men hurried forward, and Dick uttered a cry of heartfelt sorrow as he saw a man, half-supporting himself upon his elbow and endeavoring to stanch the blood which flowed from a wound in his side. A second glance showed them that, although dressed like a white hunter, the wounded person was an Indian. His hat had fallen off, and his long, dark hair fell upon his shoulders, giving him a wild and picturesque appearance.

Hearing their steps, he looked up, with a wild and startled face, and tried to reach the rifle, which had fallen from his hand, for he feared that the man who had shot him meant to finish the bloody work. But his strength was not equal to the task of raising the heavy weapon, and he fell back with a hollow groan.

"Poor fellow—poor fellow!" cried Dick. "I would not have done this for all the world."

"Me good Injun," gasped the wounded man, faintly. "Why shoot?"

"I did not mean to shoot you, my poor fellow," said Dick, earnestly. "I fired at the deer, and you received the bullet."

"Got it here," replied the savage, laying his hand upon his bloody breast. "Badger Eye die soon—he good Injun—white man shoot—bad—shoot—poor Injun."

His mind was evidently wandering, for he made no connected sentence, and his hands were fluttering feebly about his ghastly wound. The film of death was fast gathering in his eyes, and as Dick stooped to try if he could stanch the flowing blood, a great gush of black blood spirted from the wound, and he fell back again, dead.

"Badger Eye, eh?" said Kit, looking down at the body. "I ain't so sorry, now that I know who he is, acause I've swore to kill him on sight, anyhow. Why, Dick, he's one of

the men thet tied up old Jim Selleck and filled him full of arrers before the other man, his mortal inimy an' a cussed renegade, shot him through the heart. Let's leave him hyar, an' put out.'

"No, no," replied Dick. "It is only justice to give him decent burial after what has happened. I am deeply grieved that mine should be the bullet to lay him low."

"I'm sorry too—cussid sorry, acause I promised to perform the delicate operation myself; but it wa'n't to be. Howsorn-ever, ef so be ye ar' sot on it, we'll plant the cuss som'ers; 'twon't take long."

There was a spade in the canoe, for they were trapping as well as hunting, and this instrument came often into play. Kit set to work upon the softest spot he could find, and quickly scooped out a shallow grave, in which they laid the Indian after the hunter had appropriated a handsome bowie-knife and a large navy revolver which the savage wore in his belt.

"Don't waste yer sympathy on the low-lived cuss, Dick," said the guide, as he was taking off the weapons. "You don't know him ez I do, or ye'd be mortal glad ye'd put him down. That Injun was the wu'st boss-thief, trap-stealer an' murderer to the north of the Rio Grande. I know him—I know him like a book, an' it was only a question ov time when he passed in his checks. Ye've scooped him by accident, and it's a mighty good thing."

"Still it grieves me deeply."

"'Cause it's fust blood fur ye. Once ye git down to yer work, an' shoot off a few of the cussid thieves, ye won't mind it. S'pose ye see a rattlesnake slidin' along—what would ye do?"

"I would kill it, of course."

"Jess so; on the same principul our boys don't make no bones of shootin' off a red when he gits in the'r way. No two to one if he wa'n't snakin' up to ther bank fer a shot at us when he went under."

He thrust his hand into the bosom of the bloody hunting-shirt which covered the breast of the dead Indian, and to the horror of the young man, drew out a human scalp with the blood still clotted in it. A single glance was enough to show

that it came from the head of a white man, and that within a week.

"See that, don't ye?" said Kit, furiously stamping his heel upon the breast of the Crowfoot. "Now ar' ye sorry?—now d'ye feel so bad?"

"He deserved his fate," said Dick, somewhat relieved. "Cover him up at once."

Kit took up the shovel and began to throw the dirt into the grave, beginning at the foot. While he was engaged in the labor, a step was heard and a stalwart Indian, armed to the teeth, walked swiftly across the opening, and peered over the shoulder of the hunter into the bloody grave.

CHAPTER II.

THE OATH OF VENGEANCE.

Kit dropped the spade and caught up his rifle, but the Indian, by a gesture of peculiar significance and grandeur, stopped his hand. Kit dropped the butt of the rifle upon the earth, and the two stood regarding each other fixedly.

"He is dead," said the Indian, sternly. "Who killed him?"

Dick looked at the speaker with great interest, for he had never seen an Indian of the Far West upon his hunting-ground. The person before him was a man fully as tall as Hammond, dressed in regular hunter's garb, with a single exception. The cloth of his pantaloons was drawn in tightly over the thigh, and nearly to the knee, so that the cloth extended from the same upon each leg to the distance of three or four inches. This peculiar cut is seen only among the Crowfoot Indians. His hunting-shirt was of buck-skin. He wore a heavy sombrero hat, with a drooping feather upon the left side. Like all Indians of the West, at the present day, he was heavily armed, carrying, in addition to his heavy rifle, a pair of handsome revolvers, a hatchet and a knife.

Neither of the white men spoke for a moment, and the Indian stooped and brushed away the dirt which had already

fallen upon the breast of the dead man, and looked at his wound. There was no chance of deceiving him, for he knew the wound which a rifle-ball makes but too well.

"Badger Eye dead," he repeated, savagely. "A dog of the white race has killed him."

"I am very sorry—" Dick began to say.

"Ugh!" grunted the Indian, fiercely turning his really fine face upon the speaker. "You kill him?"

"Yes," replied Dick. "I wish you would let me explain that it was an accident. I fired at a deer, and not knowing that he was in the bushes, he was hit."

"Lie—all lie!" replied the Indian, in the same angry tone. "White man shoot Indian for sport."

"Look hyer, Mr. Crowfoot," said Kit, "I reckon I'd better slide in myself. I don't 'low any Injun galoot in Arkansaw to tell me or my friend that we lie. See yer: this thing happened jest ez my friend says. Come along and see the deer. Walk in front, ye know. We won't hev ye behind us."

The Indian stalked in front, directed by the leveled rifle of Hammond, and quickly reached the dead buck.

"The white man says true; he has killed a deer. How then was Badger Eye killed with the bullet which is in the heart of the deer?"

The Indian had dropped insensibly into his own language, which Kit could speak to perfection.

"He fired twice," replied Hammond.

"Did he miss the first time?"

"No; he thought the deer wa'n't goin' to drop. See yer, Crowfoot, what's yer name?"

"Sangarah, the chief."

"Ha! jess so! Ginerally they call ye Eagle's Claw, don't they?"

"So am I known among the Crowfoot Indians. Why does the white man question me thus? Who has not heard of Eagle's Claw, the head chief of the Crowfoot tribe?"

"You're about right, chief; thar ain't menny ov the boys that hain't heerd tell ov ye, one time or another, an' a good 'eal they hev heerd ain't pooty. Now, then, what d'ye want?"

"Has Eagle's Claw asked for any thing?" was the reply

"He would know who killed Badger Eye, and the young white warrior has not feared to say that his hand laid the brother of a chief in the dust. It is good; I am glad that the white brave does not know how to lie."

"I hope ye don't harbor malice, chief," said Kit, "because ef ye do it stands to reason we'd better settle now while times are good."

"Eagle's Claw does not know what his brother speaks," said the Indian.

"I want to know whether ye mean to foller us acause yer brother hez gone under?"

"Why should a poor Crowfoot chief seek to follow one of the conquering race?" replied the Indian, in tones of mock humility. "He has not lost much—it is only his *brother* who lies dead."

"I'm desp'rut' 'fraid I'll hev to shoot ye, Eagle's Claw. Promise on yer word thet ye won't seek revenge on this young man."

The Crowfoot folded his arms upon his breast and looked fixedly in the face of the hunter. Kit cocked his rifle, and with his finger on the guard, raised it to a level with the breast of the chief, who did not move a muscle.

"Come, promise," hissed the hunter. "Start yer jaw-tackle quick, Injun, fer I don't 'low men ov yer breed to hev things his own way."

"This won't do, Hammond," said Dick, throwing up the leveled weapon. "Once for all, it won't do. You ask the chief to promise something which he could not force from either of us by a threat."

"He's an Injun," replied Kit, in tones of utter surprise. "Ye don't kalkilate an Injun is *human*, do ye?"

"He is human enough to scorn the baseness of an enforced promise. Just put yourself in his place for a moment, and you will see that he can not, in honor, yield to your demand. Put down your rifle and let us go."

"He'll pop ye over the minnit we turn our backs."

"No," replied the Indian, proudly. "If the young white man is a great brave so also is Eagle's Claw. He is safe from me until my people have spoken, and if they say, 'Go out

and slay the white man who killed your brother,' Eagle's Claw will go."

"Thar," said Kit; "he as good as says he'll be arter us in the mornin'."

"Let him do as he will," replied Dick. "I will not stand by and see a man shot down in cold blood."

"Mighty squeamish, I reckon," said Kit, with slight traces of anger in his tones. "Owdashers squeamish, I must say. Howsomever, it amounts ter this—we'll hev the hull Crowfoot tribe on our backs afore sun-up. Let's toddle."

They left the Crowfoot chief standing on the bank of the stream, took up the deer and placed him in the canoe, and started up the stream at the full stretch of the paddle. Eagle's Claw did not attempt to move or raise a hand against them, but followed their course with a fixed, glassy stare, in which the determination for revenge was too plainly apparent. Once or twice his hand closed more firmly upon the barrel of his rifle, but he did not lift it, looking darkly up the stream, until a point of land hid them from his view. Then a change came over him; the dark face, before so motionless and calm, became disfigured by an expression of the wildest rage. Turning on his heel, he ran swiftly back to the grave in which his brother lay, and throwing aside the earth, dragged him out upon the grass.

"Hear, Manitou, Great Father of the nation!" he cried, raising his sinewy hand on high; "hear the words of a chief. I will paint my face for the battle; I will wear the keen hatchet, and will not again see the faces of those I love until I can take the scalps of these two white men, and lay them at the feet of Mestalu, the wife of my brother, and say, 'Behold the scalps of the two murderers.' Hear me, Manitou, while I breathe this vow!"

Then, raising the dead form upon his shoulders, he dashed away across the plain, not seeming to feel the weight of the corpse."

In the meantime, Kit and Dick were rapidly ascending the stream. Dick had given up his lazy attitude, and taking one of the paddles, aided the hunter in his task, and mile after mile of river was rapidly left behind. The face of the young adventurer was downcast, and that of Hammond was scarcely

less gloomy, for both knew that the unforeseen accident was likely to make them trouble in one way or another.

"Durn the luck," said Kit, in an angry tone, as they sped onward. "We'd got plum in the hum of the game, an' hed heaps ov fun afore us ef it wa'n't fer the cussid Crowfoot. That bullet must pick him out, an' we hed to stay foolin' 'round thar, 'stid ov plantin' him to one't. It was durned foolish, thet I will say."

"I hope you are not angry because I did not want you to shoot Eagle's Claw?" said Dick.

"I dunno ez I am, now I've hed time ter think an' git cool about it," replied Kit. "But, we'll hev to dust out'n this, ez sure ez thar ez snakes in Egypt. 'Thar ain't a more pizen tribe one't they git riled, then the Crowfoot, not in the hull kentry, an' the chief is a hoss an' a big dog on the fight. Put in yer best licks; we must git inter camp."

Three miles further up the river and they saw a thin smoke rising slowly through the clear atmosphere; and pushing their way rapidly, they landed on a strip of level land close to the bank of the stream, surrounded upon all sides by the river and the side of a rugged and nearly impassable hill. Upon this strip of land a party of men were seated, playing cards, while a fifth was engaged in cooking, stopping now and then to look over the shoulder of one of the party to see what kind of a "hand" he held.

They were playing "draw poker," of course, and in their eager interest in the game paid no attention to the approach of the canoe until it had actually landed upon the bank.

Two of the party of card-players, were Americans, one an Irishman, a Frenchman, while the last of the party and not the poorest player among them was a full blood Oneida Indian! Strange as it may seem, the vice of the white man which the Indian "cottons to" most naturally is gambling, and many of them play the game well enough to "make it lively" for their Anglo-Saxon opponents. The Irishman and Oneida as partners were winning hand over hand, which will in some manner account for the attention paid to the game. Just as Kit stepped ashore the Indian, after some desperate betting, raked in the pile which was staked by means of the ~~land~~ which is described by Mark Twain in the phrase

"the serene confidence which a Christian feels in four aces."

"Arrah thin, Boston Bill! it's yerself can do it," said the Irishmen. "Whoop, byes, that was done foine. Ye've cl'ared thim out, ye blagard Injun, be the powers."

"Look out, boys," said one of the men. "Here comes Kit and he looks as black as thunder."

"That's right, ye onnatrel heathen," said Kit. "Them blessed picters will be the death of ye one ov these fine days. Put 'em up, put 'em up, or I'll be arter with a sharp tooth-pick, bet yer life."

"No harm in a little game of draw is there?" said one of the men.

"Harm—no harm! S'pose the durned Crowfoots came down on ye instid of us? Ye wouldn't see 'em any sooner."

"We orter watched a leetle closer, I allow," replied the man, "but ye see that blasted Injun was cleaning us out, hand over fist, and we couldn't stand it. The blamed Injun; bu'sting white men in that way!"

"Sarve ye right. Now I hope this 'll be a lesson to ye, boys, because we are in danger. Dick hez be'n so unfortnit ez to knock over Badger Eye, the Crowfoot, an' Eagle's Claw kem on us when we was plantin' him and he knows all about it."

The men looked blank, for they all knew that Eagle's Claw was a bad man to avenge an injury.

"But see here, old man," said Jim Blakeslee; "we kain't go away and leave the game, can we?"

"I don't like ter do it, boys," answered Kit; "that's honest; but I don't see no other way."

"Let's fight it out. We've got heaps of ammunition, and it would take a mighty good crowd to drive us."

"Yes, ef they fight fair, but they won't. It will be cut and come ag'in, boys; knock a man over when he goes out of his camp, take his ha'r and lay fur the next. I'm afeard we'll hev to git, but I don't know."

"Let's vote on it."

"We'll sleep on it fust. Hev ye got supper reddy, Lovie? Ye don't really know the Crowfoot tribe as I do, boys—ye

really don't. Put on the fire, Lovie, and the rest draw up an' eat what comes handy."

It was a royal meal cooked as only a Frenchman can cook—fresh venison steaks, beaver's-tail, trout broiled to a charm, fresh pone bread and a can of fragrant coffee, made up the repast, and the party enjoyed it to the full. But Kit was not at ease, for he knew that Eagle's Claw would not rest until he had avenged the death of his brother.

"Pshaw, Hammond," cried Dick. "Why do you take the matter so much to heart? I am as sorry as any man can be that my unlucky shot brought the Crowfoot to the earth, but if I am to be blamed I must bear the penalty."

"I don't keer a cuss for Badger Eye, yer know," said Kit. "Blame him, I'd 'a' shot him the fust time we met; but that ain't it. What troubles me is that Eagle's Claw should ketch us plantin' the dirty red nigger; that's what's the matter with me."

"I suppose so," said the young man, "but I am not afraid of Eagle's Claw."

"I didn't say ye was, did I? At the same time, I reckon ye'd better git out of this yer section, right smart."

"Do you think I would run away from him?" cried the young adventurer, his nostrils dilating. "No, by heaven! Put it to the vote and see what the boys say about turning coward."

"I hope ye don't call Kit Hammond a coward," the hunter said in that even tone which with him meant intense excitement.

"You a coward! I never dreamed of such a thing. But I don't want to run."

"Nyther do I, but I'm a chap that allus thort it a good plan to put when a cent ain't to be made by foolhardy conduct. But a vote ye say an' a vote it is. I'll began with you."

"I vote that we stay here, and defy the whole Crowfoot tribe."

"Jess so; now Teddy, what do you say?"

"Will it be a shindy, Alanah?"

"Bet yer life!"

"Whoop! Be the powers it's meelf can do it. I ain't

had a shindy in three months and me muscle is so thin ye might shave yerself wid it, aisy enough. I'll stay, sure."

Kit turned from man to man, and the two Americans, reckless fellows at best, were for staying.

"Now, Lovie, what do you say?" demanded the leader of the party.

"Wiz ze permission of ze assemble multitude I s'all per-pound a few remark," said Lovie, whose knowledge of the English language was not perfect. "Vill ze Indian arrive wiz ze tommyhawk, ze gun and ze couteau, vat you call him—scalp-knife, eh?"

"Yes."

"Ah! zat vas bad; zat vas ter-r-r-rific! I propound one more inquiry for ze satisfacshong of ze gigantic brain, I sa'll possess. Vat is ze numerous or ruzzer ze numbare of ze savage?"

"A hundred, likely."

"Oh—ze devill! Permit zat ve run away directly mon ami. I s'all claim permisshong to lead ze way rapidly."

"I've got one vote," said Kit, grinning, "and under the circumstances I must confess that I consider Lovie the most sensible man in ther party. What do you say, Boston Bill?"

"Let us find a hiding-place and stay."

"That makes up the party, then," said Kit. "Now, I'll give my opinion, and tell ye why I give it. I vote with the Oneida for this yer reason: I want to save my sculp, an' I ain't goin' ter leave the kentry, you bet ye. I know places in these yer ranges whar I'd trouble any man ter git at me, an' thar's whar we'd better go. Look yer; s'pose the Injuns come up the river in canoes an' find us hyar. What fight could we make, and whar could we run ef we got licked—that's the question?"

"Oh, I'm in favor of going to any safe place, so that we don't leave this section," said the young man.

The rest agreed to this, and as soon as it was dark the canoes were pushed out, and the party started up the river. It was a beautiful night, and the moon, shining through the thick foliage on the banks, cast fantastic shadows on the water. The men had passed nearly all their lives from boyhood amid such scenes as this, and were not so deeply im-

pressed by its beauty as Dick Weston, although they felt its influence in a less degree.

"A grand country," whispered Dick—"a country to live and die in."

"Cease paddling there," said Kit, in a low voice. "Lay low, boys; hyar comes a canoe."

As he spoke the dip of a paddle could be plainly heard, and a few rapid strokes sent the three canoes into the deeper shadow where they would be out of sight. This was scarcely done when the head of a light canoe came in view. A torch burned in the bow, and by its light they saw a single figure—that of a young girl—standing erect in the canoe, and sending it swiftly on by means of a long paddle. A strange woman and a beautiful one, at whom Dick Weston gazed with dilated eyes, as her form was revealed in the clear moon light.

She was above the middle height in woman, dressed in the romantic garb of the border, something after the fashion of a Highland girl. Every garment was neatly fitted to her symmetrical frame, and from her beaded moccasins to her head-dress she was perfect. Her face could not be fully seen in the moonlight, but Dick was satisfied that it must be beautiful. A quiver hung at her back, and a bow was lying in the boat, but the glimmer of a rifle-barrel beside it showed that she did not depend upon the feathered shaft entirely.

The head-dress in itself was unique, being formed after the fashion of a Grecian helmet, from the crest of which a single heron plume fell almost to her shoulder. Her long hair was rolled back under the helmet, but it escaped beneath it and dropped in midnight profusion about her beautiful form. Dick Weston never moved his eyes from her figure as she came on, until he felt the hand of Hammond on his shoulder.

"Hark you, Dick! We must have her, by all the devils. That is the River Sprite—the reed upon which the Crowfoot nation leans."

"You shall not touch her!" cried Dick, furiously, half rising from his seat.

"Hold yer clam, will yer! D'ye s'pose I mean ter hurt

the gal, you blamed lunatic? I'd chop off my hand at the wrist first."

"What do you wish? speak quick."

"To hold her for our safety. The Crowfoot nation das-
sen't tech us while we hev her."

"All right; but I will guard her with my life."

"So will I!" replied Kit Hammond. "Be stiddy, boys,
and quick, fer she shoots close, I tell ye; but don't hurt
h r."

The canoe came on rapidly, and suddenly, without warn-
ing, the lurking canoes shot out into the stream and barred
the way of the River Sprite, who paused in sheer dismay and
made a dart for her rifle, but, before she could grasp it, the
hand of Hammond was on her wrist.

"Gently, gently, my gal," said the hunter. "We don't
mean to hurt ye."

The girl made no further effort, but sunk down in the
bottom of the canoe, with a look of agony, and drew her
blanket over her face.

"I'll take keer of this canoe," said Kit, stepping in as he
spoke. "The gal is all right, ye see. She's sensible enough
ter see that we don't mean ter hurt her, an' I'll say jest hyar
thet the man thet sez a word ter her he would not say ter his
own sister must hev a fight with Kit Hammond, an' I don't
reckon ye ar' game enuff fer thet."

The men understood that the hunter meant just what he
said, and as not one among them had any desire to have a
quarrel with him, the canoes passed up the river, the girl
never changing her dejected attitude. This touched the
scout.

"See yer, gal," he said. "I reckon yer afeard of us
somehow, but thet's foo ish. We are rough men, thet I will
allow, but a rough man may be a gentleman, I guess. We
ain't goin' ter hurt ye, but these yer Crowfoot Injuns hev got
a spite ag'in' us, an' they won't hurt us while we hold
you."

"Let me go, white hunter," the girl said, speaking in a
clear, musical voice. "I am on a mission of life and
death."

"I kain't do thet, gal, it wouldn't be safe."

"But I must go! Do not dare to make me your enemy, for if you do you will repent it. I have a power of which you know not."

"It ain't no use, my gal; we don't skeer wuth a cent. Ye've got ter go with us."

"I will not," she cried wildly, starting up in the canoe. "The River Sprite bids you farewell!"

Before Kit could stretch out a hand to grasp her, she plunged into the river headlong and was lost to sight. The guide uttered a cry of rage, and the occupants of the canoes turned back and looked wildly at the spot where the brave girl had gone down. The sudden change from apathy to action had surprised everybody, and Dick Weston uttered a cry of horror.

"Murderer!" he half screamed, shaking his clenched hand at the immovable face of Hammond. "She has destroyed herself, and you—you are to blame."

"Spread out there, in the canoes, you lazy pups!" yelled the guide. "Drown! Drown a fish! drown a mermaid! It amounts to 'bout the same thing. An' ez fer you, Dick Weston, ye'd better look out or ye'll rile a man that don't rile easy."

He had scarcely spoken when they saw the helmed head of the River Sprite emerge from the water two hundred yards away and close to the bank.

"Thar's yer drowned gal!" roared Kit. "Now tell me I'm a liar! Now tell me I don't know what's what! Arter her, ye imps of freedom!—chase, ye offscourin's ov this heathen sile!"

Every canoe was now in rapid motion, for even Dick Weston was vexed at the sudden desertion of the strange being who bore the name of the River Sprite. Kit led the van, the light canoe literally leaping from the water at every stroke of his powerful arm. But the girl was too quick for them, and when they reached the bank, they heard a peal of mocking laughter from the depths of the old woods.

CHAPTER III.

THE RIVER SPRITE'S VOW.

"THAR!" said Kit, as he paused from sheer exhaustion, and suffered the canoe to float at will down the stream, "I give it up, by Jingo. Of all the cussid mean tricks that ever was played on me, that's about the wust."

"You surely don't blame her for escaping?" said Dick, laughing. "By Jove, I admire her more than words can tell, for I never saw a woman do such a daring deed before. She went like a flash of lightning."

"Laughable, ain't it?" replied Kit, sullenly. "I orter bu'st ye in the jaw, an' I would, too, ef it wa'n't that ye don't know any better. Thet gal is down on us now, an' she'll hev the Injuns on our ha'nches in less'n two hours. Let's git! We hain't got no call to stay here."

They took up the paddles and continued the ascent of the river, Kit muttering fearful anathemas against "fools" in general and himself in particular. He felt that he had been outwitted by a girl, and it cut him to the very heart. An hour later they landed and concealed the canoes, but with little hope that they would escape the vigilant eyes of the Indians, accustomed to read the signs upon the leaves and grass as an open book. Completely nonplused at the action of the girl whom he had considered so safely his prisoner, Kit was yet honest enough to wish to give her back that which rightfully belonged to her, and the canoe was left in full view with every thing which was hers still in it.

"Now fer a little walkin'," said the guide. "I'd give twenty pelts out of my own *cache* ef we hadn't met the River Sprite, acause it's ten cents to a Boston mackerel she's down on us, an' when she is it ain't healthy."

"What need we fear from a weak girl?" said Dick, mockingly.

"Weak! Oh yes; she's cussid weak, she is! Let me once git my claws onto ner an' I'll teach her to dodge me

thet ar' way. I'll put her in a hitch in two seconds, ez sure ez my name is Kit Hammond. Come on ; every man kerry his own plunder."

He led them through a deep ravine by devious paths, over rocks so hard that the foot of the buffalo could not leave its imprint there, and finally brought up at a place where their way seemed barred by a nearly solid wall of trees and bushes.

"We've got to go back," said Dick. "I never thought you would lose your way in the woods, Kit."

"Who said I'd lost my way?"

"It looks like it to me," replied Dick, looking up at the impassable hedge before them. Kit made no reply, but parting the bushes at the foot of the rocks, he asked Dick to look in. He did so, but at the same moment Hammond kicked his feet from under him and gave him a push, and Dick disappeared with lightning swiftness, uttering something which sounded very much like a "cuss-word," as he went out of sight.

"Arrah, look till that now!" roared Teddy. "That I may live forever but it's a puzzle intirely. Phat was that, honey?"

"Come and look," said Kit.

Teddy approached and peered through the bushes, but he had scarcely done so when he experienced the same sensation which had so astonished Dick Weston, and a flood of very strong Irish was heard as he shot out of sight, and Kit, with a broad grin irradiating his face, turned to Lovie and invited him to approach.

"Excuse me, Mossee Hammond," said the Frenchman, spreading out his hands and shrugging his shoulders in true French style ; "I must entreat zat you excuse me. I 'ave no wish to depart from ze earth so soon."

"Bring him here, boys!" commanded Kit. "He must follow the rest."

"But I nevare have ze dezire which s'all prompt me to make ze descent," persisted Lovie, retreating. "I refuse ; approach me not or I s'all provoke you to ze field of battail. Aha!"

But Jim Blakeslee and Pete Tossor seized him and thrust him into the place pointed out by their leader, and he disappeared, also mourning loudly

“ I’ll go last, boys,” said Kit. “ All you’ve got to do is ter sit down hyar an’ let me give ye a shove.”

The Oneida went last, and then Kit sent down the guns one after another. When every thing was gone, he too plunged under the bushes and was lost to view. He had scarcely done so when the head of Eagle’s Claw rose above the bushes, a few yards distant, his eyes fixed with strange intenseness upon the silent ravine.

“ Ha !” he muttered ; “ the white men are gone ; where are they ?”

He crept cautiously out into the opening, and keeping in the shadow of the rocks, he approached the place where he had seen Kit but a moment before. He parted the bushes and looked for sign, but the bare side of the wall which nature had built was all that he could see. The chief was in a rage, and he struck his hatchet fiercely against the rocky wall.

‘ If this were the heart of the white hunter, how deep I would dig for his life. He is a dog, and the Crowfoot nation has made me the avenger of blood.”

He ran up and down the wall at its base, vainly seeking for some place at which they could have escaped, but could find nothing. There was some necromancy here which the chief could not understand. Had the rock opened to admit them and closed above them to cover their flight ? The mind of Eagle’s Claw was above the average of Indians, and he was not as open to suspicion as most of his class, but there was something here which he could not fathom. As he stood lost in amazement, he felt a light touch, and the River Sprite stood beside him.

“ Why does Eagle’s Claw look so fixedly at the rocks ?” she said. “ Does he expect them to sever again and let the white men out ?”

“ They are gone, Madah,” he cried ; “ have I seen a vision, or did the white men pass through the rocks ?”

“ Why does Eagle’s Claw follow the white men ?” she demanded. “ Have they done him wrong ?”

“ Badger Eye is dead,” replied Eagle’s Claw, “ and I have sworn never to go back to the tribe until the man who shot him down like a dog is dead.”

"Who killed Badger Eye?" the River Sprite asked, quickly.

"A young white man who is with Arkansas Kit," replied Eagle's Claw, "and I must have his scalp."

The face of the girl changed instantly. She had not been so completely overcome by her sudden capture that she did not know that Dick Weston was opposed to her seizure, and she had been struck by his bold face and figure. On this account, she was sorry to hear that he was the one selected as the victim of the wary chief of the Crowfoot nation.

"How does Eagle's Claw know that the young white man killed his brother?" she demanded.

"Did I not see him lying in the grave they dug, while Kit was heaping the earth upon him? Ha! I smell blood in the air. The spirit calls upon me for vengeance on the murderer of my brother."

"Why did he kill Badger Eye?"

"Who can tell? The white men think the Indians dogs, and slay them for their sport. See—I have sworn to the Manitou that this white man shall die, and I will keep my oath."

The girl hesitated, and seemed about to say something more, but another look at the set face of the chief restrained her. No amount of persuasion on her part could convince him that he was in the wrong, but she could not believe that Richard Weston had wantonly slain the Crowfoot brave. She knew, too, the deadly nature of the chief, and how changeless his purpose when he once set his heart upon an object. If the young adventurer remained in Arkansas, the Crowfoot would keep his word.

"I will save him," she murmured; "he would have saved me."

"I am angry with Arkansas Kit," she said aloud, "and I must avenge myself upon him. Last night, when I floated down the stream in my canoe, he made me prisoner, and said that he would keep me safe as a hostage for your good conduct."

"Kit is a dog," hissed the Crowfoot. "He must die, too."

"Leave him to me, chief; promise that I shall work out my own vengeance."

"Madah is but a woman," replied the chief, "and it is a man's work to avenge her, for Kit is very brave."

"Yet you must promise, or I can not remain the friend of the Crowfoot nation. Leave this man to me."

"It is good; he is safe from the hand of Eagle's Claw, since Madah asks for his life. But the young white man is mine, and if Madah asks for *his* life, Eagle's Claw will say—no."

"Enough; I do not ask for his life, but only that of the dog who insulted me. Now I will go away and talk to the spirits of the rocks and trees, and see if they will give you the life of your enemy."

"They *must* speak for me," cried the chief, fiercely. "I will have this man's life."

"The spirits can not be bought or sold," replied the girl, solemnly, "and no one can talk to them save Madah, the River Sprite. When yonder shadow touches the trunk of the tall pine, come to the river where the great rock stands and you shall hear the answer which the spirits send."

She glided away in the clear moonlight, and he stood in the same position looking after her, with an expression which was partly fear and partly admiration. As the slender figure disappeared among the trees he moved away to the east, toward the river, and sat down at a place where he could watch the slow movement of the shadow as it approached the tall pine. Two hours passed, and as the shadow touched the trunk he arose, and with a swift step hurried away toward the appointed rendezvous.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MASKED ENEMY.—SLIPPERY PRISONERS.

THE strange girl, known as the River Sprite, upon reaching the river, entered her recovered canoe which had been left for her, and quickly crossed the stream to a point where a huge rocky bluff rose in an almost perpendicular line from

the water. It seemed strange that she kept the head of the canoe directed toward the face of the rock, and it seemed that it must be crushed against the rough surface. But, instead of that, canoe and occupant shot out of sight with magical swiftness and were seen no more. Immediately after, the sound of a strange call was heard within the rocks—a hollow, rumbling sound which echoed and re-echoed through the passes of the mountains. Ten minutes after Madah, accompanied by a man, appeared upon the summit of the bluff and engaged for some time in conversation. It was a man past the middle age, with a mask drawn over his face. This voice was shrill and angry, as he spoke:

“I tell you, no, girl,” he hissed. “Let him die if the chief can kill him, for if he sees me I am a doomed man. You know well that I dare not meet him.”

“You can keep out of the way,” she reasoned.

“Keep out of the way? Of course I will if I can, but they will be prospecting, and the first thing I know he will meet me. They must all die, I tell you.”

“But, father, why should these innocent men die? I will keep you well posted in their doings and no one would ever suspect that you are concealed in this desolate place. Is it not enough that I am forced to live such a life, but I must see brave men murdered?”

“You don’t think of me, girl,” he cried, in that shrill, unnatural voice. “You don’t think that I am in danger at any moment, and that if he sees me—you let the chief alone! Do you want me to go down on my knees and curse you?”

“You could not do that, after all that has happened.”

“What do I care for what you have done in the past if you turn against me now, ingrate? You must not speak to me again about this, and I will not have you interfering with Eagle’s Claw and his plans.”

“Suppose we drive them out of the country; would that be enough?”

“No!” snarled the man. “He’d better die, I say, and then I shall be safe.”

She sunk down at his feet sobbing as if her heart would break, and raised her hands imploringly to him.

“Let this poor young man go away, and I will live for

my life in this wild region," she cried. "I will forget that I ever knew aught of the society of home and friends. I will become an Indian by adoption, do any thing, if you will let him go free."

"I believe that you have fallen in love with him," screamed the old man. "Go—before I curse you; I can not bear to see your face."

She sprung up with a cry of horror and bounded like a chamois down the side of the bluff, away from the river. Ten minutes later the canoe shot out into the stream from beneath the bluff and crossed quickly to the place from which she had come, a short time before. She was weeping bitterly, and upon reaching the bank she cast herself down upon the grass and gave way to a passionate burst of tears. Her sobs were heart-breaking for a time, but the paroxysm subsided at last, and she stood up with the light of a firm resolve upon her face.

"He shall not drive me to this evil," she muttered. "There is a limit to duty beyond which his threats shall never drive me. I—"

She was interrupted, for, to her horror, a man leaped suddenly from the bushes, close at hand, and caught her in his arms. So quickly was it done that she had no time to resist, although she struggled with all her power.

"I thort the canoe would be a bait fer ye," said the voice of Kit Hammond. "Now, my lettle gal, what ar' ye goin' ter do about it?"

"Release me, Arkansas Kit," she gasped. "What wrong have I ever done you?"

"Not enny; I didn't say ye did, nyther, but I've got ter hev ye. It's a p'int of honor with me now, acause ye cleared out so mighty suddent, a few hours ago."

"You have made an enemy who will not soon forget this indignity," she cried, "and it shall go hard but I will avenge myself. Fool that you are, a word from me will seal your fate."

"I reckon that's mighty right, gal, an' that's the reason I want ye."

She struggled again, but his iron hands were on her wrists and the struggle was in vain. Standing easily in his tracks

he looked on her flutterings with the smile of conscious power laughing at her feeble efforts at escape.

"I don't want to dictate to sich a gal as you ar'," he said, "but this yer won't pay ye. I don't mean ter hurt ye, in the least, an' I'll lick enny man thet tries it, but I want ye an' I'm goin' ter hev ye, so ye mout ez well come along."

She saw how useless it was to resist, and prepared to follow him, but at this moment she heard a light step, and uttered a loud scream for help. The coming step quickened and the agile form of Eagle's Claw darted from the bushes. With an angry oath Kit released the girl and bounded toward the savage. As he did so something cut along his cheek, laying it open to the bone. It was the hatchet which Eagle's Claw flung at him from a distance of thirty feet, but his aim was somewhat disconcerted by haste, as he made his cast. Before he could lift the second hatchet which he carried, Kit was upon him, and the two powerful men linked in a grapple for life and death. As they closed, the hunter uttered a clear whistle which was answered from a point not far away.

"Fly, Madah," cried the chief. "A white dog comes to help Arkansas Kit."

The girl caught up her rifle from the canoe and looked at the cap and stood ready to raise it if attacked. The bushes parted and Dick Weston sprung out upon the bank and was about to rush to the aid of Kit when the girl leveled her rifle at his breast and ordered him back.

"It is a fair battle," she cried. "I will not see two set upon one."

"Keep back," panted Kit. "Ef I kain't lick him, no-buddy kin in these yer mountains. I'm a hull team an' a big ferg—you bet."

They seemed evenly matched, indeed, and Dick, waving aside the leveled rifle of the River Sprite, came a step or two closer and watched the fight. Both men were splendid specimens of muscular force, but the long arms of Hammond gave him a certain advantage in a struggle of this kind. Up and down the trampled sward, hand and foot ready to take advantage of the slightest mistake, went the two men, thirsting for each other's blood. Eagle's Claw was trying to work his left arm free for the purpose of drawing a knife or pistol,

but Kit felt the movement and resisted it to the utmost. They were tottering upon the brink of the stream now, when Hammond threw forward his foot and locked his heel behind that of the Indian—a Cornish trick which he knew well—and the Indian was hurled over his hip into the flowing stream. He went out of sight at once, and Kit drew a pistol from his belt and waited.

“Stand a leetle one side, Dick,” he said; “this yer critter hez blowed his horn about enough, I should jedge, an’ he’s got ter go under.”

“If you dare to fire at him, when he rises, I will kill you!” cried the River Sprite, in a stern voice.

“On-core! ez Lovie would say,” replied Kit. “Dick, this yer gal is a bu’ster, I must say. She’d shoot, too, she would. Take thet little shootin’-iron away from her, or, like as not, she’ll hurt herself.”

As he said this, his eyes did not leave the river, from which he expected to see the head of Eagle’s Claw emerge. But he waited in vain, for either the chief had been stunned by the fall and had perished in the flood, or had swam under water for a great distance, as he did not appear.

“I feel drefful mean about this yer,” said Hammond, as he swabbed up the blood upon his cheek with a piece of moss. “I kalkilated on gettin’ thet thief’s skulp. Now, my gal, throw down thet bit of iron and give yourself up prisoner.”

“Never! The man who lays a finger on me shall die. You may kill me, but make me your prisoner—never!”

“What’s the use of foolin’, gal? I’m bound to hev ye.”

“Stand back, I say! I would have been your friend and have aided you in escaping from the country. Even now, after all you have done, I will give you a warning. As for you, Richard Weston—”

“My name!” cried Dick, in utter astonishment. “What does this mean?”

She cast a startled look at him, for the name had slipped from her mouth accidentally.

“I have heard Kit speak your name,” she said.

“I don’t like ter tell a young lady thet she is makin’ up a

story, but thet yarn sounds strangely like it. Ye never heerd me call him any thin' but Dick ; thet I'll be on."

"It does not matter. You are in a greater danger here than you ever can be in any place in the world. One who hates you deadly, and who seeks your life, is stirring up the Indians against you, but I desire to save your life. Go ; put the mountains and the valleys of Kansas between you and this place before many hours, or you are doomed."

"You are not an Indian," cried Dick ; "who then are you ?"

"That you shall never know. By all the ties of blood and duty I ought to be your enemy ; but I can not be the enemy of one who has never done me wrong."

"This danger to which you refer—do you mean from Eagle's Claw ?"

"You must not question me," she replied, wildly. "I have broken my word in telling you this much, and will speak no more."

"Them thet kin speak an' won't speak must be *made* ter speak," said Kit, shortly.

"Who will make me speak ?" she demanded, scornfully. "Go your ways now, and remember my warning."

"I ain't so hot ter git out of the country, now thet Eagle's Claw hez gone under. I only wish I hed his sculp, thet's all. But, gal, ye've got ter come with me til I make sure thet the Crowfoot is dead."

"If you insist upon it I suppose I must," she said, mournfully. "Here is my rifle"—uncocking the weapon, and putting it into his hand—"and now—good-by !"

A plunge in the river followed, while a hearty laugh from Dick showed his appreciation of this second escapade.

"Oh, durn my hide an' taller !" yelled Kit, as he plunged after her ; "I'll foller her to China."

The head of the River Sprite first appeared, as she sprung half out of the water from the clear depths, with a silvery peal of laughter. It was evident that, once in the water, she had no fear of any man, for she was now in what might aptly be called her native element. But, in Arkansas Kit she had a foeman worthy of her, for the man who had killed the alligator in his native stream, with only a knife for a weapon,

must be a good swimmer—and Arkansas Kit had often performed this feat for mere sport. He was highly incensed at the sudden escape of the River Sprite, and as his head popped out of the flood, and he dashed the water from his eyes, he uttered a loud shout of triumph, for he did not think it possible that a woman could escape him here. He threw all his muscular force into the effort, and dashed after her down the stream. At the same moment Boston Bill, the Oneida, who had been scouting, appeared on the bank above, and plunged into the reeds along the bank with a fierce yell.

Boston Bill had detected Eagle's Claw lying hidden among the reeds, and, careless of danger, assailed him, and the two, locked in a fierce grapple, went out into the stream, until the current took their feet from under them, and they went down the river, struggling as they went, fighting as fiercely as if they had solid ground beneath their feet. At any other time Arkansas Kit would have rushed to the assistance of his Indian friend, but he was so intent upon the capture of the River Sprite that he did not pay any attention to passing events. He only saw her before him, dashing through the water with a long, easy, sweeping stroke, which, in spite of his almost superhuman efforts, kept the same distance between them all the time.

"I'll hev her ef I bu'st a blood-vessel," muttered Kit, as he threw all his power into his strong arms.

"Durn me fur a coyote, ef I don't think she is playin' with me," after five minutes of silent struggle. "Oh, what would I give to git my hand on her ag'in!"

They were now in the midst of the current, when she turned and swam toward the wall of rock where her canoe had disappeared that day, when she visited the masked man in the hills. Suddenly, without warning, she dove down into the deep water and was gone. The bubbles came up where she went down, but he saw her no more.

Treading water for a moment, Kit looked about him. The bare, brown rocks which lined the bank looked frowningly down upon him, as if to warn him back, but his eagle eye could discern no place through which a human body could make its way. As he was yet glancing up and down the

wall, a voice called to him from the rocks above, and he saw the River Sprite, with a strong bow in her hand.

"Go back, Arkansas Kit!" she cried. "Of all men on earth, I would not have your blood upon my hand, for I know that, though rough and rude, you have a noble heart."

"I reckon I won't go back," shouted Kit, beginning to swim toward the bank.

She drew the bow to her ear, crying:

"The first shaft will cut through your hair; the second will be aimed at your heart."

The bowstring twanged, and he felt the barbed steel cut its way through his curling hair. Kit was a man who knew when he was beaten, and he threw up his hand.

"Don't shoot ag'in unless you want to," he said, quietly. "I cave in."

He turned to swim back, when another figure appeared beside the River Sprite. It was that of the masked man.

"Why don't you shoot him, girl?" he hissed. "I've seen you kill a partridge at that distance. Give it to him between the shoulders."

"I am not an assassin," replied the River Sprite. "It is Arkansas Kit, and he is a good man."

"Arkansas Kit! Death and destruction! Give *me* the bow."

There was a struggle for the possession of the bow; he succeeded in dragging it from her hand, and, snatching an arrow from her quiver, he drew the deadly weapon to his ear; but, as his eye glanced along the shaft, she stole behind him and just touched the taut bowstring with her small knife. It was done so neatly that the man did not see the knife when he turned, imagining that it was a defective bowstring, and cursing his luck, he drew a pistol.

"Look out, Kit!" cried Dick Weston. "Dive—quick!"

As he spoke, he threw up his rifle and fired at the Mask, almost without aim, but, as luck would have it, the ball struck the pistol from his hand without hurting him. Kit had disappeared, and when he came up was fifty yards away, out of all chance of pistol-shooting.

"If I had only brought my rifle," hissed the Mask. "I have half a mind to fling you from the rocks and send you after your friend; I shall do it, some day."

"I am afraid there are few crimes at which you would ~~hesi-~~tate," she said, mournfully; "but there is One above who will protect me, even from your hand. I have been true to you through many trials, but the end of my faith is near."

"Come back!" he said, hoarsely. "When these scoundrels are gone, you will forget your wild words, and be a faithful daughter again. As for my harsh words, I retract them, and beg your pardon."

"Oh, look, look!" cried the River Sprite. "On the rock in the stream!"

A few hundred yards below them a rock, perhaps four feet across, with a flat top, protruded from the stream. Dragging themselves out of the water, still struggling fiercely, appeared Boston Bill and Eagle's Claw. Both gained a footing upon the rock, and upon this narrow space, locked together, they looked furiously into each other's eyes.

It was a struggle worthy of the grand old chivalric days. Those bronzed figures, stripped to the waist, every muscle standing out in bold relief; the gleaming eyes, the statue-like *pose* of the bodies, were worthy of the sculptor's art.

"Who will win?" said the River Sprite. "They are both strong men."

The question was soon decided. The knives gleamed, blood dropped upon the brown rock, and Boston Bill, pierced through the heart, dropped dead at the feet of Eagle's Claw, who pealed out a shrill cry of victory. At this moment Dick, who had loaded again, gave him a shot which raked through the flesh upon his bronzed side, but did not inflict a wound which would incommode the Indian for a day. Shielding himself behind the body of his slain enemy, he tore off the hideous trophy of his victory, and shaking it in the air, plunged headlong into the stream.

"Come away," cried Kit, as he drew himself out of the water. "That's the last of Boston Bill, a good comrade on the trail. Let's find the boys, and make a new camp."

CHAPTER V.

THE GUARD'S PREDICAMENT.

ALI. was silence in the camp of the adventurers. The tired men slept the sleep of the just, with the exception of Dick Weston, who sat a little apart from the camp with his back against a huge sycamore, his rifle lying across his knees. He was thinking of the meeting with the "River Sprite," and of her wondrous beauty and grace. He was a man who had met and vanquished many a beautiful woman with her own weapons, for he was not one to yield easily to woman's witchery and wiles.

Why did this strange, wild girl impress him as no other woman could? Why was it that he had yielded so suddenly to her witchery—he, who had resisted the power of Cupid so long and well? Wrapped in thought, he forgot the lapse of time—forgot that he was on guard, every thing—except the beautiful face of the girl. He could not know of the deadly peril which hung over him, yet a terrible danger was very near.

Had he looked out into the shadow, twenty feet from the spot where he sat, he would have seen three dark objects extended upon the earth, close together, motionless and silent. Even if he had seen them he might have taken them for any thing except what they really were—yet those dark objects were far from being without danger to him.

Ha! What is that? One of these is seen to glide slowly along the earth to the right and disappear. Another follows, and still another, and nothing is left to tell what these ominous shadows could be. Still Dick Weston sat beneath the sycamore, sucking at his pipe furiously as he always did when in deep reflection, and had no thought of danger, when suddenly and in silence, a shadowy arm was stretched out from behind the sycamore—a strange pungent odor began to assail the nostrils of the young man and before he could cry out a cloth covered his mouth and nostrils, while his body was pinioned to the tree by iron hands. It is useless to at-

tempt to struggle, for those hands will not loose their hold, and he felt a deadly stupor coming over him as he inhaled the deadly drug in which the cloth was drenched. A moment more and he lay supine under the hands of his assailants. With a celerity and caution which was wonderful, they lifted the prostrate form and disappeared in the silent woods, moving on like ghosts in the shadow.

Half an hour later, Dick Weston awoke as from a troubled dream and began to realize the fact that he was in a strange situation. He lay in a canoe, swiftly gliding down the river, bound hand and foot. Some one sat at his head but he could not see who it was, as, from his position, it was impossible to turn his head. The moon was up and shedding its radiance on river and forest, revealing plainly the figure in the bow of the canoe, and with a thrill akin to terror Dick recognized Eagle's Claw, and realized that he was in the power of the man who had sworn to take his life. The chief held a paddle which he was using with the skill of long practice, and the canoe shot rapidly down the stream. Another canoe floated beside them in which sat two stout Indians in the unmistakable dress of the Crowfoot. They never turned their heads, but suffered their canoes to float swiftly on down the rapid stream without interruption of any kind. Eagle's Claw looked over his shoulder and saw that Dick was awake and looking at him, and he shot a glance of undisguised triumph at his prisoner, who realized that he had little mercy to look for from the Indian.

"What is this?" cried Dick. "Why am I taken prisoner in this cowardly way?"

"Is Eagle's Claw a coward?" said the Indian. "Look; I have made my face black, in mourning for my lost brother. Soon the stain will be washed away in the blood of the slayer of an innocent man."

"Innocent! chief—do you know that your brother had a white man's scalp in his bosom the day he was killed?"

"Badger Eye took scalps from his enemies when he slew them in battle. It is good that he should do so, for it is the way of our nation."

"Then he was righteously slain, but I tell you that I did not shoot at him."

"Wagh! Is Eagle's Claw a dead dog that he should believe the lying words of a murderer who is afraid to die?"

"You shall see, when the time comes, whether I can meet my fate like a man," replied Dick, quietly. "I am no coward, but if I die I prefer to die in fair fight."

"Let the white man keep his talk for those who would hear it," the chief answered. "My ears are deaf; I can not hear your words."

Not another word was spoken as the two canoes shot silently down the stream.

Whoever sat in the stern of the canoe had not spoken, and Dick vainly attempted to turn his head to get a glimpse of him. They passed the place where Eagle's Claw had attacked them upon the night when, with Arkansas Kit he had trailed the River Sprite, and kept on down the stream. And now a familiar spot appeared in view, the spot where Dick's unlucky ball had laid Badger Eye low, and the prisoner began to understand why he was being brought to this place. He was to be led to the grave of his victim, for what purpose he did not know; perhaps for sacrifice.

The canoes landed, and Eagle's Claw stepped out and held the canoe while his companion followed him. By this time the Indians in the other canoe had landed, and coming forward aided the chief in lifting Dick out of the canoe, when the cords which bound his feet were cut. As he stood up, supported on each side by an Indian—for his blood still refused to circulate in his ankles where the ligatures had been—a slight form glided suddenly from the bushes and stood before them. It was the River Sprite in all her glorious beauty.

"The Crowfoot has taken a captive," she said, quietly. "Has war been declared between the Crowfoot and the white men?"

"War has been spoken against him, Madah," replied the chief, with a look of admiration in his eyes. "You see before you that white dog whose bullet killed my brother. For that I will whave his life; I have sworn it."

The girl came nearer and looked into the face of Dick Weston. As she saw who it was, she started and looked at the man who stood just behind Eagle's Claw, and who seemed

anxious to keep out of the way. He was of rather slight figure, stooping considerably, his face covered by a mask.

"This is *your* work," she said, in an angry whisper. "Why was it done?"

The man made no reply, but pointed to the chief as the one to question. The girl said no more to him, but turned again to Eagle's Claw.

"What will the Crowfoot do with this man, who has killed Badger Eye?" she asked.

The dark face of the chief lighted up strangely at the question. What would he do with the murderer of his brother? What punishment was cruel enough for the revenge which he sought? He had not thought of that yet, although the idea had come into his brain that he ought to slay him above the open grave of Badger Eye.

"Madah has given the chief something to think about," said the Crowfoot. "He has been very cruel, and ought to die a cruel death. If I kill him on the grave of my brother, it will not be enough."

The man in mask uttered a bitter oath as he saw the effect of the Sprite's apparently simple question, for he did not wish Dick Weston to live another hour.

He caught her by the wrist and dragged her aside.

"What do you mean, mad girl? While this man lives there is no safety or rest for me upon the face of the earth, and yet in spite of this you dare to interfere."

"What have I done?" she replied, innocently. "I only asked the chief what he meant to do with his prisoner."

"You have set him to *thinking*, and he will not be satisfied now until he has studied out some torture more terrible than any ever heard of. Girl, it is far better for him to die at once."

"But he did not intend to kill Badger Eye. I am satisfied of that from what I have already seen and heard."

"It is false; he shot the Crowfoot down in cold blood."

"False!" she cried, with dilating nostrils; "do you tell me to my face that I speak falsely?"

"I did not mean to say that," he replied. "Don't get excited over a hasty word, but aid me in persuading the chief to finish this young hound at once. I tell you that I am in

danger—fearful danger—while he lives. Beware that I do not think that you are taken by his face—that you love my bitter enemy—or it will be the worse for you.”

“I can think of no worse fate than to lead the life I have been leading for three years,” she answered. “Oh, the river tempts me, you know not how much, to find a grave in its depths. You will drive me to it some day.”

“You are crazy, child. Once get this man out of the way and we may safely go out into the world and bid it defiance. I hate him and all his race as I hated his father—the man who made my life such a bitter burden in the days that are gone by. Will you obey me?—will you help me to persuade the chief to destroy this one blot upon our lives?”

“You ask too much,” she answered. “I may consent to keep quiet and let matters take their course, but as for aiding in his destruction I will never do it if you kill me where I stand. You tell me that this young man is a villain and deserves to die, but he has never done me any evil, and seems to me to be a true-hearted man. I will not aid in his death.”

“But you will keep quiet and let me work?”

“I will try.”

“You had better, for as I live, if you interfere with me again, I will not answer for your safety. Be careful how you cross me in my revenge.”

During this colloquy the chief had stood in deep thought, leaving Dick Weston in the grasp of his two guards, who did not loosen their grip. The man in mask drew the Crow-foot aside, and spoke rapidly in the Indian tongue.

“I see that you falter, chief,” he said angrily. “You have forgotten that you loved your brother.”

“The ‘Deadly Hand’ is speaking with a false tongue. Eagle’s Claw has not forgotten, for yonder is the grave they dug for his brother, and the murderer is here.”

“Why do you hesitate, then? I tell you that this is a treacherous and cunning young dog, and if you are not careful he will play you some trick yet and get away.”

“Eagle’s Claw is not afraid of that, Deadly Hand. His hands are tied, and he is in the grasp of two of my best warriors. He cannot get away.”

“Why do you not take your revenge at once? Badger

Eye wanders alone on the bank of the silent river, and you will not make a fire to light him across the stream. That is not like a good brother."

"The Badger Eye will know *why* Eagle's Claw has waited," replied the Indian, in an almost tender tone. "I loved him, for he was a brave warrior and has slept in the same blanket for many a year. I am waiting to think of the best way for his white man to die."

"Bah! let me think of a way. What do you say if we tie him to a tree and practice on him with rifles?"

"My brother, the Deadly Hand, might make a mistake and shoot too quick, for he hates the prisoner very much."

"Who told you that I hated him?" replied Deadly Hand, fiercely.

"Your *face*," was the reply. "You would give much to see him dead."

"Suppose I say that this is true; do you not also hate him?"

"It is good; but Eagle's Claw would have him die *hard*, and you would have him die quick. We are not alike in this."

"I don't care how hard he dies, if you only finish him," replied Deadly Hand, fiercely. "Why not set up a stake over the grave of Badger Eye, and burn him?"

"That is good," replied the chief, taking a savage delight in recounting the tortures he could make Dick Weston endure. "My brother speaks well, but even that soon ends."

"I have heard of prisoners who have been tied by the hands to two young pines which had been bent together, and which sprung apart, and slowly tore them limb from limb."

"Ha!" screamed the chief. "Let it be so, Deadly Hand. You have spoken the doom of the murderer of my brother. Show me how it is done."

Deadly Hand, with a chuckle of triumphant malice, led the way to a place not far from the grave of Badger Eye, where two young pines stood, perhaps fifteen feet apart. He pointed out to the chief how the tops might be brought together, the prisoner fastened to them securely, and then, suddenly cutting the cords which bound the tops together, the

captive would die a death of fearful agony. Eagle's Claw smote his hands together with a cry of ferocious joy, for in all his thoughts of cruel punishment he had never heard of any thing so dreadful. As he turned toward his prisoner he saw the two men who held him fly in different directions, and caught sight of the agile figure of Dick Weston as he bounded down the bank. With a wild cry of rage the chief leaped after him, followed by the Deadly Hand.

CHAPTER VI.

THE "BRUSH."

Two hours after the abduction of Dick Weston, Arkansas Kit rolled over and sat up, rubbing his eyes. This man could awaken whenever he chose, such is the power of the human will. He had said, before lying down, "*I will* wake in three hours," and exactly three hours after he rose and looked about him.

"All quiet on the Arkansas, ain't it?" he muttered. "Yah-h-h-h! I'm cussid sleepy yit, and them chaps sleep like ez ef they never reckoned on wakin' up ag'in. Now then, I'll take Dick's place and let him hev a snooze, but, glory be to Gideon—ef I ain't mortal sleepy."

He took up his rifle and stepped to the place where he had left Dick on guard, but to his surprise did not find him. Yet no thought of the truth crossed his mind.

"Dick," he cried, softly. "Come, don't play 'possum now, boy; I've come to stand guard."

Receiving no reply, he called a little louder with the same result.

"He's asleep, cuss his picter'," growled Kit. "That is what allus happens when ye trust greenhorns on guard duty. Some one orter kick my starnpost clean out of me fur 'lowing it, anyhow. Dick! why the dogs don't you speak? Darn my powder-horn, you'll raise my dander fust thing you know."

He groped his way about under the tree, expecting to touch

the prostrate form of Dick Weston, but he was nowhere to be seen. The hunter began to be alarmed, and called to Jim Blakeslee to light a knot and come to him. The man obeyed quickly, and as its light fell upon the spot lately occupied by Weston, he saw that he was gone—where, he did not know.

“Thunder and lightning, Jim,” Hammond shouted, in amazement, “whar hez the boy gone?”

Jim stood petrified, for he thought Dick Weston a true man, and could not believe that he would abandon his post, leaving them in danger from a sudden attack.

“This means suthin’ more than shows on the face, lads,” said Kit. “Hold down that thar light, Jim, and let me look. D’ye see this, boys? Injuns hev bin hyar within two hours.”

Most of the men were old trailers, and it needed but a glance to convince them of the truth.

“Ah, grande ciel!” cried Lovie. “Le sauvage ’ave carry heem away, ’a vedestroy zat ver’ fine young man. Wiz ze permission of ze multitude assembled at zis place I shall demolish ze whole tribe of ze Crowfoot; aha!”

“Hould yer whist, Lovie, me boy,” said Teddy. “Faith an’ it’s yersilf can do it foine an’ swate. A Crowfoot w’u’d rise the hair av ye, moighty aisy, d’ye mind?”

The Frenchman drew himself up with the air of Napoleon on the Island of St. Helena, and exchanged a glance of defiance with the Irishman, who, in no way averse to the fray, advanced with the intention of picking a quarrel.

“Me ancestor, Mick O’Toole, av Castle Ballyacklinn, bate three Frenchmen at wanst, an’ sure it’s mesilf will not retrate from a single man.”

“Dry up, both of ye,” cried Kit, “or I’ll make it right lively fur ye both; you hear me? Now, then, who is with me to find Dick Weston?”

Every man was ready, for the genial young adventurer had made friends with all in the camp.

“It lacks two hours of daylight,” said Kit, “and we want daylight to find a trail. Lay down and finish your sleep, and leave me to watch. I’ll wake you ez soon es I kin see the trail.”

He was as good as his word, and two hours later, with weapons ready, the little party were following on the trail of the captors of Dick Weston. They reached the river bank, and while the rest were getting out the canoes, Kit was examining the footmarks upon the bank.

"Eagle's Claw hez bin hyar," he muttered. "I know that long, narrow footmark among a thousand. The old cuss never gives up, and he's bound to hev revenge on Dick and me omehow. All right; I'll give him his gizzard full of fight, ef that is all he wants."

The canoes were brought out and the party were ready to embark, when Kit paused.

"Boys," he said, "I think I know whar Eagle's Claw hez taken our friend. You know Dick killed his brother by accident, and acourse it's mighty hard on him, an' he'll want to massacre the boy over Badger Eye's grave."

"That's it, old man!" said Jim Blakeslee; "bet yer life yer right."

"Now, I'm thinkin' whether it wouldn't be the best thing fur us ef I went ahead to kinder spy out the land ov Egypt. What d'ye say?"

"Some one orter to scout a leeile," replied Jim. "I don't care much who it is, so s'pose we send Lovie."

"Ah, Mossee Blakeslye!" cried Lovie, spreading out his hands in a deprecating manner. "Pardonnez moi—zat is to say—excuse me. I 'ave not ze requisite skill, ze celerity, ze—vat you call him—*finesse* vich is require' for scouting. I must decline ze duty you impose upon me."

"It's afeard ye are," cried Teddy.

"Afraid?"

"Yis; coward!"

"Mille diables! Coward—*poltroon*—oh, ze *diable*! My good friends, you s'all excuse me vile I proceed to pulverize zis man, who 'ave insult me. I demand satisfaction—ze satisfaction of a gentleman for zis insult."

"I've told you once afore I wa'n't goin' to hev no quarreling," said Kit, in an angry tone; "and you'd better be mighty keerful, both of ye, or I'll light on ye like a hawk on a June bug—I will, by the big basswood. Now shet up, while I talk. You take the canoes down to the 'Twin Sycamores,

run inter the reeds and wait fur me. Yer boss of the gang, Jim."

Jim Blakeslee obeyed without a word, and, in order to keep the peace, put Lovie into one canoe and Teddy into another, and in this order they proceeded down-stream, hugging the southern shore. The "Twin Sycamores," two gigantic trees which grew together upon a bare eminence, close to the river-bank, were soon in sight, and pushing the canoes into the reeds which grew up from the muddy bottom, the party lay quiet, waiting for the signal of Arkansas Kit.

Jim Blakeslee could see that Teddy and the Frenchman were boiling over with the desire to engage in wordy combat, and taking out a pistol, he laid it across his knees.

"I will shoot the fust man thet speaks above a whisper," he hissed, through his set teeth. "We ar' in danger, and *must* hev quiet."

Even Lovie understood that, and he contented himself with making the most frightful grimaces at Teddy, who was no match for him in the way of hideous faces. Thus Lovie managed to pass a very quiet half-hour, while Teddy was furious because he could not speak.

"It's breaking me heart I am, Jim," he whispered. "The faces av that bla'g'ard haythin would vex the sowl av a saint, be the powers they would."

"Hold yerself in, Teddy," whispered Jim, in return. "Don't git mad acause Lovie can beat ye at makin' faces. Ha, what's that?"

A canoe, with a single occupant, shot up the stream past their hiding-place. At a glance, they recognized Dick Weston, who was bending vigorously to his paddle, flying for dear life. Close behind him came another canoe, containing four Indians, who were straining every nerve to overtake the man in front.

"I reckon we'd better stop the critters," said Jim. "Take up the rifle, Pete Tosser, and let's give 'em a skeer."

Two rifles were leveled, two thin puffs of smoke and flame shot out from the muzzles, and the two savages in the end of the canoe dropped their paddles and toppled over into the stream.

The sudden attack took the Crowfoot by surprise, and in a

moment the canoe was floating down the stream with only one man in it, the masked white man who had showed such deadly enmity to Dick Weston. This man could not swim, and throwing himself prostrate in the canoe, he allowed it to float at will down the stream, raising his head enough to see that he was drifting out of reach of his enemies.

Hearing the report of the rifles, Dick Weston looked back over his shoulder, and saw that his pursuers had sought safety in flight, but as yet he could not see who his unexpected friends were, for the canoes were still hidden by the bushes. A moment after, they came in view, pushing after him at full speed.

"Hurrah!" cried Jim Blakeslee. "We done the Crowfoot that time."

His exultation was short-lived, for he saw Eagle's Claw suddenly spring from the water, utter a whoop of defiance, and plunge into the bushes. He had hardly done so when a succession of signal-cries told that the Indians were assembling from all quarters, and that if they escaped, it must be by running the gantlet.

The canoe which held the masked man had been forgotten, and, to their surprise, a bullet whizzed through the air and cut its way through the cuticle of Dick Weston's left arm.

"That's a close shave," he cried. "Who has got a spare rifle, boys? That villain in the canoe is trying to kill me."

Jim Blakeslee passed out a rifle from his own canoe, and Dick aimed at his masked enemy. That worthy, with great discretion, dropped at once into the bottom of the canoe.

"Cowardly sneak!" screamed Dick; "take that!"

The rifle was discharged, and the bullet tore its way through the light bark of the canoe, and plowed a deep furrow in the back of the masked enemy before it passed out at the other end of the craft.

"You've scooped him, Dick," shouted Jim. "Hi, thar's Kit on the shore, and we've got to take him off. The rest of you keep up-stream, and let us do the work."

Arkansas Kit was seen peeping from behind a tree close to the river, and beckoning them to take him off. Jim Blakes-

lee was not the man to desert a comrade, and Teddy and Pete Tosser worked with a will. The light canoe shot in toward the shore, when the peculiar rig of the Crowfoot braves could be seen close upon him.

"Enter the water, Kit," roared Jim. "The red cusses ar' c'lose onto ye."

Kit turned to obey, but in doing so, caught his foot in a creeping vine and fell to the earth. He had just time to spring to his feet when the leading Indian rushed incautiously upon him, and received a blow from the left hand of Arkansas Kit which cut open his cheek, and laid him stunned and bleeding upon the earth.

"Whoo-oo-oo!" yelled Arkansas. "I'm a b'ar in a trap; I'm a tiger in a cage; I'm the boss fighter of the Arkansaw! Take that, you red scullion—take that!"

Six Indians hurled themselves at once upon the determined guide, eager take him *alive*, but they found a prize they could not seize. Shaking them all off, for a moment, he managed to get a clear swing for his clubbed rifle, and in an instant, two more lay beside their fallen companion. All their efforts seemed to be directed to taking him alive, not to kill him, and to this fact he owed his life.

Up and down the trampled sod they went, the Indians clinging to him like cats, and shouting for help; but the help came from the wrong side. Jim Blakeslee, Teddy and Pete are upon them, and in less time than it takes to tell it, the Indians are put to flight, and the canoe once more in motion, with the rescued guide in the midst.

"Cross over, quick," he cried. "Thar ain't a cussid Crowfoot on the other bank of the river this morning, and we are jollable safe thar. Whew! them cusses give me a tussie, didn't they? It was durned lucky you happened in jest then or I'd 'a' bin in limbo now."

"I reckon," said Jim. "Tell the boys to push for the other bank."

There was need of haste, for the Indians were now fully aroused, and the bullets began to patter about the canoes, as they spun rapidly across the stream. Seeing that they were likely to get safe across, half a dozen canoes appeared, loaded down with savages, who began to cross a little way below.

"Durn the Crowfoot," growled Arkansas Kit. "They want our ha'r the wust kind, don't they? Thet old thief, Eagle's Claw, thinks so much of his cussid brother. Whew! that ball was well-meant."

A flying bullet had cut one of the barred tails from the crest of his coon-skin cap, and Arkansas Kit shook his head with a light laugh, while the three canoes shot into the reeds out of sight of the Indians.

"We've got ter git cover, boys," said the leader; "thet's all thar is about it. We'll make a camp and fight fur it—them's my opinions."

The canoes were headed for the bank, at a place where high bluffs rose from the water's edge, not far from the place where the River Sprite had disappeared in such a mysterious manner in her canoe. A moment more and the party, screened by the bushes, were at bay, their rifles pointed at the approaching foe. A very few shots were sufficient to send the Indians to cover, for these worthies do not expose themselves in an unnecessary manner to the shots of white marksmen. Satisfied for the present that they were safe from an attack in front, Arkansas Kit clambered up the face of the cliff to note the approaches from the rear. He found, to his delight, that there was a sharp descent, and that a little labor would make the place a fortress.

"Leave one man to watch the red heathen and the rest climb up hyar," he cried. "I've got some work for ye to do."

Pete Tosser remained as a guard, and the others hastily clambered to the side of Kit, who was already busy piling up loose stones, to cover the only approach to the cliff—a path about twenty feet wide.

"Make a little barricade, boys," he said. "Durn my buttons ef we ain't struck it rich; this yer dirt is gwine ter pan out heavy, now you bet yer life."

They understood him at once, and in half an hour had built a barricade four feet high across the mouth of the pass. They had hardly done so when Pete Tosser's voice was heard calling to them.

"I say, Arkansas," he cried "hyar's Eagle's Claw, with a flag, and he sez he wants ye."

Kit rapidly descended the cliff, and saw Eagle's Claw alone in a canoe, not far away.

"If I come, shall I be safe to go away again?" he cried.

"Come on," growled Kit. "You shan't be hurt no way."

"I'm sorry ye talk to him that way, Kit," said Pete Tosser. "He orter hev a ball through his cussid hide."

"Nun of that, Pete," replied the leader, angrily. "A flag is a flag, say what you will, no matter who kerries it. Don't you lay a finger on the chief, no matter what he sez."

The Indian shot his canoe dextrously up to the cliff, and sat in it, while Kit descended and stood beside him.

"I am glad my brother has come alone," he said, speaking rapidly, in the Indian tongue. "It is better so, for we can speak without fear. Why is my brother at war with Eagle's Claw, who always has been his friend?"

"Who begun it, Injun? thet's what I want to know."

"It was begun by the bullet which laid the Badger Eye in the dust," replied the Indian. "But the Crowfoot chief does not quarrel with any except that young white man."

"You kain't quarrel with him and not with me," said Arkansas Kit; "I'm his friend to the back."

"Why should you be his friend? The Crowfoot tribe is stronger than you think, and will have their revenge. I seek his blood, and I will have it. Our prisoner has escaped, and I am here to ask why you dare protect him?"

"That's enuff, chief. I'll stand by him until the last dog is hung."

"Will you not give him up to Eagle's Claw, and make a great chief your friend?"

"No."

"I know that the white man loves the yellow dast he calls gold. Give up this young man, and I will show you where it lies so thick that you can take it up in your hands."

"Look hyar, Injun; d'ye think I sell my friends fer a good claim? Now you offer me thet jest wunst more and I'll crack you over the head. I sw'ar you can't buy nobody hyar."

"My brother is too rash, and will not give up this murderer. It is well; Eagle's Claw will come and take him."

A single stroke of the paddle sent his canoe flying out, a dozen feet from the bank, and in five minutes more his form was hidden behind a point. The moment this was done Kit sprang up to the level.

"Git yer weepens reddy, boys," he cried. "'The red cusses will give us a try 'fore long, bet yer life."

He had hardly spoken when the first shot was fired whistling close to his own head, and evidently well aimed.

"Git kiver!" he cried; "hooray fer a big b'ar-fight. I'm a bu'ster on the war-path; I'm red-hot p'izen, stuffed with brimstone. Shoot close and sure. Hyar they come!"

CHAPTER VII.

PETE TOSSER'S EXPLOIT.

THE Crowfoot warriors did not hesitate long, having satisfied themselves that nothing could be done by diplomacy. The position of the white men was a strong one, but, urged on by their chief and his masked friend, they began to creep up the slope, sheltering themselves behind every projection among the rocks and in every crevice which could hide a human form. The Indians were well armed, far too well armed if the United States law in regard to arming Indians, had any effect. Unscrupulous men are always to be found who, for the love of money, will do any thing, no matter how base.

Arkansas Kit was the first man to mark down an enemy. He stepped cautiously to a place from which he could look down the pass, and waited. Just at the first turn in the pass there was a sort of groove in the wall of rock, scarcely three inches wide, and through this groove the keen borderman caught sight of something which gave back a strange metallic gleam. That something was the eye of an Indian, steadfastly regarding the barricade.

"The cusses need a lesson," said Kit, as he slowly brought his rifle to a level, "and I'm the man to give it."

As the last word left his lips, the rifle exploded, and a wreath of feathery smoke curled slowly upward. A wild yell was heard, and an Indian started up from behind the rocks with his hands to his head, spun sharply round on his heel and fell dead in the middle of the pass, his ghastly face, clotted with blood, turned up to the summer sky.

"One!" said Kit, coolly. "He would hev it, the low-lived critter. Who comes next?"

There was a moment of ominous silence, during which Pete Tosser silently stepped to the front and laid his rifle across a stone in the barricade, waiting for a chance. Not a sound was heard except that made by Kit, as he rammed home a charge in his deadly rifle, a smile of triumph on his hard brown face. Pete Tosser's chance came soon, for a brown hand was thrust out from behind the rocks and clasped the dead Crowfoot by the long black hair. In doing this, his arm was exposed to the shoulder, and before he could draw it back a ball from Pete Tosser's rifle shattered the bone at the elbow, crippling him for life.

"Hooray fur us!" hissed Pete. "Take my place, Jim Blakeslee."

Jim was ready, and Pete fell back to load while another savage unwarned by the fate of his two companions put out his hand and seized the dead man by the hair and succeeded in dragging him a foot or two nearer the rocks, when the crack of Blakeslee's rifle rung out and a terribly shattered hand was drawn back while a howl of agony was heard.

"Them critters want to save that sculp awful bad, boys," said Kit, as he stepped into Jim's place with his reloaded rifle, "but, I reckon we've made it hot fur them, anyhow. Three men kain't do us enny hurt, thet's sartin. Hullo; thet's a new game!"

A hand darted swiftly out and was seen to touch the breast of the corpse and was as quickly withdrawn before Kit could fire. A moment more and apparently without the help of hands the body began to move along the ground, but the keen eyes of Kit saw the buck-skin thong which was doing the work. Drawing a fine bead he had the satisfaction

of seeing the thong part and the body once more became stationary.

"Good enuff, old man," cried Pete Tosser. "It's you fur a true bead, ain't it? Thunder! I couldn't see thet buckskin, let alone hit it. Now, what's the next thing on the keerds?"

The next thing was something they could not guard against, for a log about two feet thick was pushed out until it touched the body, another was laid on top, and behind this barricade a warrior crawled out and succeeded in drawing the body of his friend to a place of safety.

"Thar," said Hammond, drawing a long breath, "I kalkilate we got the best of *thet* skrimmage, boys. Ain't it bully? I ain't hed another sech fight sence last season and I was lit'rally sp'ilin' fur a muss. Look sharp now, lads, ther mussy, ther awful mussy, and we'll git a rush in about three jerks of a ram's horn. Now you hear me!"

Every man in the barricade stepped silently to his place. Each had his rifle loaded, and laid a revolver upon the rocks in front, ready for use as soon as he had emptied the last barrel. They had not long to wait, for the Indians, incensed beyond the bounds of prudence by their loss, suddenly rushed out from their cover, discharged their rifles at the barricade, and rushed on, in the face of a deadly fire. The hunters answered their charging yell by cries as fierce and defiant, and every one picked his man, dropped the rifle and took up the revolvers. The Crowfoot braves were game, but they could not stand the deadly hail-stone hurled at them by the revolvers, weapons rarely used and as little understood by the Indians, although they are learning rapidly in our day the use of that most effective weapon at close quarters. They broke and fled to the shelter of the rocks, followed by the derisive shouts of the hunters who had so bravely performed their work.

"Run, ye divils, run!" cried Teddy. "Acushla, mavourneen, why would ye die!"

"Zey run!" cried Lovie. "Aha, we put zem to flight. I s'all pursue zem and what you call heem—raise ze ha'r!"

"Git back, Frenchy!" roared Arkansas Kit, thrusting the Frenchman back as he was clambering over the barricade, "d'ye want to git yer ha'r lifted?"

He was not pushed back a moment too soon, for, as his head showed for a fraction of time over the barricade, a ball grazed it, cutting a lane through his hair. It was a close shave, and Lovie turned yellow with terror.

"Ver' ferocious Indians, ze vat you call heem, Crowfoot," faltered Lovie. "I s'all remain behind ze wall. It is ze safest place, begar, I *say* so!"

"And you say mighty right, Frenchy," said Kit. "It is lucky I pushed you back or that ball would 'a' made crow's meat of you. Lay on yer arms, boys; they won't try us ag'in by daylight."

This proved to be true. While the greater portion of the Indians guarded the pass, others carried the dead and wounded—most of whom had been removed in their flight—down the steep bank to the water's edge, where they were placed in canoes and carried to the other side. Here a large party of squaws waited with litters, and the bodies were laid upon green boughs and carried by the mourning women across the plain until they were lost to sight in the distant woods.

"It's rough on them, I allow," said Arkansas Kit, "but they orter know'n that we ain't the right sort o' boys to tackle. Ef they don't know it, they'll find it out afore long. Got a light, Dick? I'm sp'ilin' fur a smoke."

Dick gave him his match-safe, and the hunter loaded his pipe and smoked as coolly as if any danger to life or limb was a thing unknown. Most of the others followed his example, and they who did not only refrained for the reason that they were on guard. These were Pete and Jim, who stood near the barricade, with their eyes fixed upon the pass. A single dead Indian lay half-way between the barricade and the turn in the rocks, one who had been brought down as he fled, last of all, for a place of safety. Pete Tosser looked at him with hungry eyes. "I want *thet* hair, Jim," he muttered. "Kain't I hev it, noways?"

"They'll rub you out, old man," replied Jim. "Better not try it."

"But I *want* it, Jim; I want it bad," replied Pete. "Thet cuss stole my traps two year ago, and I swore by the big horn spoon I'd take his wool. Seems as ef I must hev i, somehow."

"I'll back ye the best I know," said Jim, "but I don't think Kit would let ye go ef he knew it."

"I kain't stand it," replied Pete. "I must hev thet wool."

As he said this, he threw himself suddenly over the barricade, knife in hand, and made a rush at the body, bounding from side to side, to disconcert the aim of the Indians. His clothing was cut in a dozen places, and slight flesh wounds were given, but he reached the body, and dragged it under the rocks, out of the reach of the bullets. Wild cries of rage from the Indians announced how they were enraged by this bold move, but they dared not make a rush at him in the face of the waiting rifles. Pete quietly tore off the hideous trophy, thrust it into his belt, and waited for an opportunity to return to the barricade. By stealing close to the rocks he could reach a point within a hundred feet of the desired haven, but that hundred feet was dangerous to pass over.

Making a signal to his friends that he was coming, Pete suddenly burst out of the cover, running with incredible swiftness. The bullets hurtled through the air, scored his flesh and drew the blood in half a dozen places, but rising into the air with a flying leap, he cleared the barricade with a bound, and alighted in the midst of his companions, "scotched, not killed."

"Now you durned black-headed, 'possum-gutted son of a thief!" roared Kit, "what did ye do thet fur?"

"Don't git mad, Arkansaw," pleaded Pete. "I wanted thet ha'r; I wanted it bad, and I'd swore to take it."

"Orter hev lost yer own," growled Kit. "I kain't teach you nuthin', try how I will, Pete Tosser."

"I won't remind ye how Pete Tosser saved yer life on the Brazos," said Pete, quietly. "'Tain't fair thet I sh'u'd do thet."

"Give us yer hand, old pard," said Kit; "I didn't meant to be ha'sh, and ef I didn't keer fur you, I'd let you drive whar you liked; but Pete Tosser's life is suthin' to me, ain't it?"

"All right, Arkansaw; b'ar with the old man's failings whar it is a ke-vestion of ha'r, and 'specially ha'r he dotes on considerable. I won't do it ag'in."

"Not till the next chaine, I s'pose," added Kit. "I wonder what them cuases are at now boys?"

"Let me go and see," said Pete.

"Thar you go ag'in, Pete Tosser. How the blazes kin you go and see, 'thout losing yer pesky skulp?"

"Kain't I go 'round 'em?" replied Pete, angrily; "say, now, kain't I?"

"It mout be done," admitted Kit. "I'd go myself, ready enuff, only I want to watch you boys ag'in' you git inter trubble. Ef I let you go, Pete, do you promiss to be keerful?"

"Keerful ez a coon," replied Pete.

"All right. Don't take yer rifle, boyee; revolvers will do. I'll lend you one of mine, but don't shoot unless you hev to."

Pete examined the revolvers carefully, and clambering down the rocks in the rear of their position, screening himself from the sight of the Indians on the other shore behind the bushes which grew upon the bank, he made a circuit of nearly a mile before he turned toward the Indian lines. Pete Tosser was an able scout, one not likely to make mistakes. No sticks broke under his tread, no leaves rustled as he passed. His footsteps awoke no echoes. Silent as death and as relentless he passed along, until he reached a place from which he could look down upon the Indians. Parting the screen of bushes in front, he peeped down and could hardly repress an exclamation of surprise.

Nearly one hundred savages were seated in groups about the entrance to the pass, crouching about little fires and conversing rapidly with each other. Close to each man's hand lay a rifle of the most approved make, while knives and hatchets were in their belts. A very few had pistols, but these weapons, as a rule, are not cared for by the savages. Looking upon this camp at a distance, a green scout would have said that they were white men, for nearly all wore hats and caps, generally sombreros, the head-covering most affected by the western Indians. But their pantaloons had the peculiar cut upon the seams which is never seen except among the Crowfoots.

Just below the rocks among which Pete Tosser lay, sat three persons, in one of whom Pete recognized Eagle's Claw. The other two were man and woman—the man being the

masked friend of Eagle's Claw and the woman the River Sprite. The two men were conversing eagerly, and Pete could make out most of their conversation.

"You must own up to one thing, chief," said the masked man; "if you had listened to me this morning you would have had your revenge, upon Dick Weston, to say the least."

He spoke English so perfectly that Tosser knew he at least was not a Crowfoot. The chief seemed troubled, and did not immediately reply.

"My brother does not lie," at length replied the chief. "Why should we speak of that which is past? Let us rather think how we may get him into our hands again."

"It shall be done, chief; I took him before, and I can do it again—but this time I will drive a knife into his heart if he attempts to escape. Leave me to talk with the girl, and then I will tell you what we had better do. You will waste your men if you attack them again by daylight. They have a strong position, are armed to the teeth, and are desperate; and though we may beat them, we are more likely to fail."

"My men are brave," said Eagle's Claw; "they will do what I tell them."

"No doubt—no doubt. But if we can do the job without losing men, it is far better, I take it."

The chief nodded.

"Then leave me with the girl. She can help us in this as no other can."

The chief rose and walked away, and the Mask turned upon the River Sprite, with a fierce glitter in his eyes.

"Now, my girl," he said, savagely; "a word in your ear. You aided this prisoner to escape, this morning."

She did not reply, but sat with bowed head, refusing to look at him.

"If any man had dared to tell me yesterday that you, of all others, would have turned traitor to me, I would have hurled the lie into his teeth. But now, alas—it is only too true."

She did not speak.

"Why do you sit there silent, mad girl? You forget who

I am, and what obedience you owe me. I told you—I proved to you, that this Weston's death was necessary to my safety, and yet, in the face of that, you crept behind him and cut his bonds. Dare you deny it?"

"No!" she replied, boldly; "I *did* set him free, but I deny that he means to harm you."

"I tell you that he is in Arkansas in search of me, and will leave no stone unturned to run me down. By any accident we may meet, and from that hour I am doomed, for his family does not know the meaning of the word mercy."

"If you tell the truth, you have no right to expect mercy at his hands."

"Do I not say so? Then why do you turn upon me, like a snake, and aid my enemies?"

"He will go away if you keep yourself out of sight. Why did you leave the hiding-place, where you were safe, to risk meeting him?"

"Because, from the moment I saw his cursed face, I knew my danger. I tell you again, once and for all, that while he lives I have no safe'y on earth. You have aided him to escape—you shall re him back into our hands."

"I?"

"You!"

She started up and faced him boldly, with a look of determination on her face.

"You may kill me if you will, but as there is One above us, you shall not make a traitorous decoy of me. I swear it by my dead mother's name."

CHAPTER VIII.

"THE SPRITE'S MISSION."

It was with the utmost difficulty that the hunter, lying in the shadow of the bushes, repressed a cry of admiration at the brave bearing of the girl, as she stood erect, her eyes flashing fire and her hand extended in a superb gesture of disdain.

The masked man started and laid his hand upon a knife, while his eyes gleamed through his mask like living coals.

"You forget yourself when you lay your hand upon a weapon to frighten me," said the River Sprite, coldly. "Am I the one likely to be scared by the gleam of a steel blade?"

"You wrong me," he said, removing his hand. "If I touched my knife, it was not with any intention of doing *you* wrong. I am grieved, more than angry, that you should deliberately give my life away for the sake of a stranger."

"Wait," she said. "I will do one thing to aid you, since you will it. I will go to the camp of these adventurers and find out if Richard Weston is really in search of you."

"That will be something," he cried, quickly; "if you will do no more, I will even rest satisfied with that, if you will go at once."

"I will go."

Pete Tosser did not wait to hear more, for the girl turned as if to climb the rocks in the direction of the place where he lay hidden. Withdrawing suddenly, and without noise, the scout quickly repassed the ground over which he had gone that morning, and appeared suddenly in the midst of his companions.

"Hooray!" cried Arkansas Kit; "hyar comes Bully Pete. Now, old boy, what do ye say?"

"No danger yit, Kit; the bloody thieves don't hanker arter any more blue pills, jest now, acause they've got enough to last sev'ril days. That's the way the thing looks to Pete Tosser, about this time of day. Say, Dick, d'ye know you've got a deadly inimy among them Injuns?"

"Eagle's Claw?"

"Not him; he's a saint alongside that cuss in the black mask. *He's* a black devil, if ever one lived on the airth."

"What do you mean?"

Pete rapidly recounted the conversation he had heard between the Mask, Eagle's Claw and the River Sprite, and Dick Weston's face took on an expression of terrible joy.

"Have I run him to earth, then?" he cried, with dilating nostrils. "Could you see his face, Pete?"

"No; he war masked, I tell ye. Nigh as I could make

out, he war a man about forty-five year old, ruther small and thin, with a sharp, shrill voice."

"Good!" cried Dick. "Now, boys, I'm not going to tell you why I want this man's life, but I *will* have it, I swear by all the saints. I have tracked him from city to city, and for three years have never swerved from the trail, and when he took to these mountains I followed him still, relentless as death."

"Hold on," said Pete Tosser; "I don't want to interfere with a private kind of a muss, nohow, but one question I've got to ask ye, my boy: d'ye mean to hurt the gal?"

"What girl?"

"The River Sprite."

"Why should I harm her? she has already saved my life and I think her a grand and beautiful woman. Harm her; *never!*"

"All hunky, then," said Pete. "Sock it to that old thief in the mask, all ye want to, but don't tech the gal. I'm mighty fond of gals, myself, I want ye to know. I orter be, when I've got three wives in the Injun kentry."

"That is rather an overdose of felicity," said Dick, laughing. "Three wives! Brigham Young will have to look to his laurels."

"I ain't sech a thunderin' fool as to keep 'em all in the same ranche," replied Pete, philosophically. "No, sirree! I've got one at Leavenworth, one at Camp Scott, and one at Santa Fe. *She's* a Mexican, that one, and ef that woman ain't enuff to make a man cuss his parents, I don't want a cent."

"What's the matter with her, Pete?" queried Kit.

"*Jaw!*" roared Pete. "*That's* what's the matter with her; jaw! you orter see her and hear her when she let's herself loose. You would admire to hear her, the durned Greaser. It's more'n awful, and I don't kalkilate to stay in Santa Fe mor'n three days at a time. But, look thar boys; the River Sprite, by thunder!"

As he spoke, the beautiful girl appeared, passing rapidly down the slope on the right, and advancing boldly. She held in her hand a piece of white cloth, which she waved as a signal of amity.

"Now be keerful, boys," said Hammond. "Don't let us hear any loose talk while this gal is in camp, 'cause I won't stand it."

"Don't you fool yerself, Kit," said Pete Tosser. "I'll give that man six inches of cold steel that dares say a bad word, ef it was my brother. I *spoke* that piece my self."

The rangers laughed, and looked earnestly at the girl as she came on, swaying the white cloth back and forth to attract their attention. Kit waved his hat, as a signal to her to advance, while Pete Tosser drew Dick aside, and whispered in his ear.

"Ha!" cried Dick; "forewarned forearmed. I shall know how to meet craft with craft."

The girl leaped lightly over the slight barricade upon the left, and stood in the camp. She did not touch the rifle that was slung at her back, but stepped just inside the barricade.

"I know you, Arkansas Kit," she cried, "and you never break your word. Do you promise that I shall be permitted to leave the camp whenever I like, and that I shall not be insulted while here?"

"I give my word," replied Kit. "Do you want any stronger bond?"

"No," replied the River Sprite. "The word of Arkansas Kit is as good as his bond, and that is saying a good deal in this wicked world."

She advanced quickly, and stood in their midst, calm and unconcerned, perfectly at her ease, and looking from face to face in a frank, fearless way.

"You have had a hard fight," she said, addressing Kit, who stood leaning on his rifle, regarding her with a steadfast look.

"I've see'd harder," replied the guide, "but the Crowfoot know their little biz on a raft; they are bufler on the war-path; prary-bulls on a tare, and Eagle's Claw is the boss of the gang. Why in thunder don't the red cuss let us alone, when we don't want to fool with him?"

"You killed his brother—or, rather, your friend did. I know that it was an accident, but he will never believe it, and

will follow you to the death. I have come to offer my aid in letting you escape."

"We ain't afraid," said Kit.

"I know that; but there is little bravery in wasting human life. Yonder are Eagle's Claw's men, mad by the loss of their friends, armed to the teeth, and only waiting for the night to destroy you. One hundred Indians are too many for you, in a night attack."

"We ain't babies."

"You are brave men, but even you know that one of you are not equal to twenty, brave as you are. I come as a friend to beg you to escape, while there is time."

"I hate orfully to be driv' out of the kentry," said Kit; "but the gal is right. Take it in the daytime, and we'll fight a regiment hyar, but at night, when they kin send in twenty-five men on four sides, it ain't so he'lthy. What do you want us to do?"

"Escape before the attack comes. You will have two good hours after dark."

"We'll think about it," said Kit. "One thing I will say, it's a mighty good thing in you to come hyar and warn us arter what we've done. May my hand drop off at the wrist ef I ever try to make you pris'ner ag'in."

"You were kind even when you made me a prisoner, Kit," she said. "Do not think that because I am protected by the Indians that I live among them from choice. I would gladly accept poverty among those of my own race if I could live among them. Any thing to live again with those who know something of the life to which I was born."

"Lady," said Weston, advancing, "may I beg a word with you alone?"

"What do you wish to say to me?"

"I will tell you, if you will give me the opportunity," he replied. "I want you to understand that I hold the life which you saved at your disposal, and am ready to lay it down when you will it."

"The life which I saved?"

"Do not affect ignorance," he said. "You came behind me when I was a prisoner and cut my bonds. I know this to be true."

A blush stole up into the beautiful cheek of the girl, and she turned away her head.

"I did not think you knew it," she said, softly. "I would not have come here had I known, for it would look as if I courted thanks from you. I only did my duty by one of my own race, and would do the same by any man in the same danger."

"I believe you would," he replied, "for you have a noble heart. Will you give me the interview I ask?"

She signed to him to follow and led the way down the rocks, near to the bank of the river.

"It's eddication, eddication," muttered Kit, with a sigh. "Oh, ef I only had it I'd never let sech a gal ez that waste her life in the backwoods of Arkansas. But, what am I but a rough borderman, and what chainece hev I ag'in' sech a man ez Dick Weston? But, he's a true man and I'll stand by him, ef I die."

The bold scout was hit harder than he would have allowed. In many respects he was far above his associates, and would not stoop to waste his heart upon an Indian woman, as many of the border-men do. He had never loved; but this girl, in her beauty and grace, had touched him more than any woman in his time. It was a struggle to give her up—to think that another man was winning her heart, but he knew how to battle with himself.

"It's hard; it's mighty hard," he thought. "He's got chainces I never had and never will have, and he mout leave her to me. Many a man in my place would make an inimy of him for less, but it ain't my way. No; let the best man win, whoever he is. Thet's the motto of Arkansas Kit."

The girl stopped behind a large boulder which hid them from the camp. She had promised the "Mask" to find out why Dick Weston was in the Indian country, and she would keep her word.

"What do you wish to say to me?" she asked, with down-cast eyes.

"I wish to thank you first for what you have done for me," he said. "You had nothing to thank me for and might have hated me, for I was with the men who twice attempted to take you prisoner."

"Yes, but I have ears, and both times I heard you protest against it," she answered. "You did me no wrong, but spoke to me as if I had been a lady instead of the wild creature I really am."

"You *are* a lady. Your language, your manner, all tell me that you are a lady, by birth and education. No one could doubt this for a moment, who had eyes to see and ears to hear. No, lady; you would find it hard to make me believe that you are what you make yourself out to be."

"A lady! To plunge head foremost into a boiling river. Your ideas of lady-like conduct are strange ones."

"Bah! Is it any worse to plunge into a river, than into the surf of Newport or Long Branch? You swam to some purpose and made your escape by it."

She laughed merrily. "Upon my word! I have long looked for an apology for my fish-like habits and you have found it. I thank you a thousand times."

"A lady!" repeated Dick. "A lady in my estimation is one who has a noble heart, and you have that. One who is beautiful and graceful—and you are that. One who is pure in heart and in life, and you are that. What more would you require to make a lady?"

"You apologize warmly for my faults," she said, with a rising color, "but I must not stay here to listen to compliments. Remember that I come as an envoy from the enemy to spy into your camp and that I am turning traitress to my employers for the sake of brave men. Do you mean to leave the country if you escape from this place?"

"Hardly."

"And why?"

"First, because I have work to do here and can not leave until that work is accomplished."

"What work can you have to do here?"

"My first and greatest work," he replied, boldly, "will be to make you love me enough to leave this wild place with me forever."

"Sir! Arkansas Kit promised me that I should not be insulted."

"Lady," said Weston, quietly, "look in my face and see if I mean an insult by what I have said."

"I do not think you mean to insult me," she answered softly, "but you are wrong to speak it. What you think of is impossible."

"And why? I love you dearly and would make you my wife if you think me worthy."

"You do not know who I am," she cried, wildly. "If I but spoke my name you would shrink from me in horror."

"You never wronged me; why should your name have any terror for me?"

"I never wronged you, it is true, but my—friends have done so. There; let us say no more, but I hope that you will turn your back on Arkansas and leave us in peace."

"I shall leave when I have done my work," he said, quietly. "I have other work to do besides winning your love, and all this I will do. As for my enemies, I defy them, for I have faced death at the hands of bolder men a dozen times in the last five years."

"But your enemies are secret ones; you do not know them."

"I never fear a *masked* enemy," replied Dick, pointedly. She started and turned pale as death, and moved away from him suddenly.

"There is one man on earth," said Dick, not noticing her movement, "who has injured me in a way for which there is only one atonement and that the atonement of blood. I have sworn by all I hold pure, by my earthly hopes, by things present and things to come, that I will follow that man until he has atoned in his own person for the wickedness of his heart and for the innocent blood which he spilled."

"Blood?"

"I see that you do not know all, and if every thing is as I suspect you ought not to know. This is a family feud, and I will carry it through to the end."

At this moment they heard a strange whistle sounding amid the rocks.

"I am called," cried the River Sprite. "Do not detain me, but bid me good-by forever and a day."

He caught her hand and raised it to his lips. The next moment she was gone.

CHAPTER IX.

TEDDY'S MUSCLE.

NIGHT came—the beautiful night of this fair Southern lime, the delightful odor of the blossoms stealing upon the senses with a bewildering power. All was silent about the stronghold of the hunters, but a spy upon the mountain side could catch occasional glimpses of their crouching figures, and see the two upright forms upon guard. The hunters were waiting for the attack which they knew must come.

About the camp all was silence, but it was the silence which is the prelude to the storm. Many dark figures were seen crouching among the rocks, waiting for the signal to advance, a light shown upon the southern bank of the stream. The Crowfoot force was divided into quarters, each under the command of a noted brave. The Mask remained with Eagle's Claw, and seemed as eager as he for the fray to commence. He was fully armed, and kept fingering the lock of his rifle in a hasty, irresolute way.

"There will be no mistake about the matter this time, I tell you," he hissed. "If I level on him I shall hit my mark."

"My brother can hate as well as Eagle's Claw," said the Indian. "His hate is older than mine, but if Eagle's Claw can shoot first, my brother must not blame him."

"Little do I care whose hand lays him in the dust," replied the Mask. "All I ask is to see him dead, the last of his hated race. Ha! ha! ha! I know what became of the others."

"Why do they not light the signal?" muttered the chief, uneasily. "Perhaps the white men have escaped."

"Not they," replied the Mask. "Let us scout up the pass and satisfy ourselves."

They stole up toward the barricade, and peeping cautiously out, saw the stone wall stretched across the mouth of the pass, and the cap of one of the guards just visible between the stones.

"I could give that fellow a headache," said the Mask, half raising his rifle. "Shall I fire, Eagle's Claw?"

The chief threw up the barrel of the rifle quickly, and understanding the motion the Mask did not cock his weapon, but allowed the butt to drop to the earth.

"They are waiting," whispered the chief, "and they are doomed. Ha! see the signal."

He turned, and looking across the stream, he saw a light gleam for a moment and disappear. The crouching figures behind Eagle's Claw started to their feet, and fifty men on the right and left of the camp did the same, for they knew that the hour had come, and brandishing their weapons they leaped forward like bloodhounds on the game, without a single cry to warn the enemy of their advance. They are close to the barricade, and yet not a shot tells that the hunters are on the alert. From four sides the dusky figures rush on, and as they reach the barricade, one wild yell bursts from each throat, for they think that the enemy is in their grasp. Flinging themselves boldly over it, with weapons poised, they pause, and the yells of triumph change to quavers of surprise, for the camp is empty. Two or three logs about the size of human forms are lying upon the ground, and two "dummies" with buck-skin shirts and beaver caps are standing against the barricade with sticks artfully placed to represent guns, but not a white man is in the camp.

"Fooled!" hissed the mask, blind with rage.

"The white men are too cunning for us," said Eagle's Claw, his lip quivering with rage. "Hugh! My blood is turning to ice in my veins, and I am mad. Where have these white dogs gone?"

"One thing is certain," said the Mask; "they have been gone for some time, and all our labor has been in vain. No doubt they left while we were placing the men."

Eagle's Claw turned to one of his men standing near.

"Go down and see if they have taken their canoes."

The man bounded rapidly down the bank, and returned as quickly.

"The canoes are here," he said, "but they are spoiled."

"The fellows are on foot then," said the Mask. "Now what are we to do? Shall we attempt to follow them with the whole band, or shall you and I take the duty on ourselves?"

"Will you go with me?"

"To the death!"

"Let the warriors go back," cried Eagle's Claw," turning to his men. "Eagle's Claw and his friend alone will avenge the slain of the tribe."

Accustomed as they were to obedience, the warriors did not hesitate, and in the shortest conceivable time the chief and his masked friend stood alone upon the cliff. Neither spoke for some time, but stood looking at each other with fierce implacable eyes. Suddenly the Mask drew a knife and baring a sinewy arm, he pricked it with the knife-point until the blood flowed.

"Dip your hand in my blood, chief of the Crowfoot!" he cried, in a tone of savage meaning, "and swear that you will stand by me to the last gasp, and that you will not turn back until Richard Weston and Arkansas Kit are under the sod."

The chief touched his hand to the flowing blood and took the oath, and the Mask did the same.

"We will not be particular in the manner of their death, chief," said the mask; "any thing, so that they die."

"Agreed; let them perish like dogs, as they are. We will be snakes in the grass as we follow the trail. Our eyes will not sleep or our steps fail. The sticks will not break under our tread as we crawl into the camp of the hunters. One by one they will die, and when all is done, Eagle's Claw will claim his reward."

"What shall it be?"

"The River Sprite must come into my lodge and be my squaw."

"It would be a just punishment for her presumption in daring to love my enemy," the Mask muttered, "and a good thing to hold over her as a threat." Then he spoke aloud: "Does the chief love the River Sprite?"

"Her voice is music in my ears," was the reply. "Her smile is like sunshine, and her eyes the stars above us. She has a brave heart, and is worthy to be the wife of a great chief."

There is something wonderful in the pride of an Indian chief, after all. This man, lord over a few hundred subjects, was as proud of his station as any crowned king. He felt that he ennobled the woman he might choose for his wife, and

the thought did not enter his head that he was in any way unsuited to marry such a woman as the River Sprite. The Mask listened to him without showing any aversion to his suit.

"Eagle's Claw is a chief," he said, quietly, "and I am a great medicine. When our work is done we will talk of the girl."

"Will my brother give her to me then?"

"Yes, provided you aid me in destroying Dick Weston."

"He is dead!" cried the chief. "I have spoken his doom already."

"Good. I suppose it is of no use to attempt to follow them to-night?"

"No; the trail is blind, and we can not find it."

"Then let us try to get a little sleep, for we shall not take much rest until our work is done."

The two wrapped their blankets about them and lay down in the shelter of the barricade. They had hardly done so when a slight figure, which had been lying hidden behind the shelter, rose, and crept away, with a light step, through the pass. As the figure came out into the light, the form of the River Sprite was seen, her beautiful face full of anguish, grief and shame. She kept on her course for nearly a mile, and then stopped upon a mossy bank, and burst into a passionate flood of tears.

"And to think of the sacrifices I have made for his sake," she murmured through her tears. "I have given up all for him—have left the life for which I am fitted, and followed him into this wild region only to be sold to this savage chief. Oh, heaven! have I deserved this at his hands?"

Her grief overcame her, and for half an hour she could not utter a word. At the end of that time, by a desperate effort of the will, she sprung to her feet.

"But it shall not be!" she cried. "I have saved them once; I will save them again and again. We shall see who has the most cunning, since cunning is to do the work. The River Sprite is on the trail!"

The Mask was the first to awake, just as the gray light of morning showed itself in the east. He touched Eagle's Claw and he awoke.

"It is time we were on the move," he said; "but first, I must see Madah."

He raised his hand to his mouth and produced the peculiar whistle which had recalled the River Sprite from her interview with Dick Weston on the preceding day. The whistle was answered in the distance; rapid steps were heard, and the light figure of the River Sprite cleared the barricade and stood before them.

"You called me, and I am here," she said. "What do you wish with me? Before you say a word I tell you that I will have nothing to do with the further pursuit of these white men, in any way whatever. If you intend to follow them you must do it alone, I assure you."

"It is only right, Madah," said Eagle's Claw. "This is men's work, and not the work of squaws. We do not ask your aid."

"I did not ask *you* any thing," replied the Sprite, in a tone of pallen resentment. "I wish to know if I am expected to help you in following these men."

"The chief has answered for me, my girl," replied the Mark. "We neither need nor ask your help."

"Why am I called, then?"

"I am going away, and shall be gone for some days," he answered, "and in the meantime I leave our home in your charge. You had better stay there most of the time, as you will not have my protection and that of the chief."

"Bah!" she cried, striking her rifle with her open palm; "I can protect myself against any man, I care not who it may be. What cause have I for fear?"

"But these cursed whites may be hidden near by, and might make you a prisoner again, as they know that you are a friend of the chief. Obey my orders and keep in the cave."

"I can not and will not stay there, all the time," she answered. "I must have the free mountain air. I *will* have it, too, in spite of any one."

"You are inclined to be contrary, this morning, my dear," he said, with an ominous closing of the teeth. "Be very careful or you may make me angry, and when I am angry—you know me."

She made no reply, but stood in a defiant attitude, looking at him, fixedly.

"We waste time here," said the chief. "A young girl should listen to the words of those who are old and we shall be pleased with her. Let us go."

"A word first," said the Mask; "and mark it well, my girl. Let us have none of your tricks, or it may chance to be the worse for you. Take my warning for what it is meant and good-by."

The two men moved away from her, and began to search for the trail, while she stood in the same position, looking after them with a strange smile. She saw them turn an angle in the rocks, still looking intently at the ground for the trail.

"The time was when such words from him would have broken my heart," she murmured; "but now I fear that I think more of Weston than one of my blood should. What did he mean when he said that nothing but blood could atone for the crime of which his enemy had been guilty? I knew it was crime, but I did not think it had blood in it."

The two men did not come back, for the keen eyes of Eagle's Claw had already found the trail, and they were away up the river.

"Now to trail the trailers," muttered Madah. "Who will win?"

CHAPTER X.

A STRANGE INTRUSION.—THE CAVE PRISON.

PERHAPS in the country about the Arkansas there was no man who was equal to Eagle's Claw as a scout, if we except Arkansas Kit, who was at least his equal. The eye of the chief could detect the slightest mark upon the leaves. A bent twig, a broken stick, a stone pressed into the soil, the slightest deviation from nature were signs to guide him.

The Mask was a good trailer, but he made no attempt to exercise his craft now, for he felt that he was in the presence

of his master. The trail led along a narrow ledge close to the bank of the river, but screened from observation by a fringe of bushes. They understood at once how easy it was for the adventurers to escape from the toils set about them. For nearly a quarter of a mile the trail pursued this course, and then struck across a bend in the stream and reached the river again, half a mile distant. Here the trail ended abruptly, and the chief paused.

"Have they crossed the stream, chief?" the Mask demanded.

"Not yet," was the reply. "See—Arkansas Kit is a good scout, but he is no better than Eagle's Claw. They have waded in the river."

"I see," replied the Mask. "Let us follow them upstream."

"No!" replied the chief.

"The marks in the water point up-stream; what do you mean?"

"Let my brother look at the marks in the sand. The heel has sunk deepest in the dirt. If they had walked forward, would not the toe sink deepest?"

"True."

"Then they have walked backward in the stream. Kit is cunning, but I will show him that the Crowfoot nation is not without a chief."

They retraced their steps a few hundred yards, moving close to the bank of the stream, and were seen no more. They were now nearly opposite the place where Eagle's Claw had struggled with Arkansas Kit, and had escaped by plunging into the water.

"They have crossed here," said the chief. "Let us do the same."

The banks of the stream were lined with scattered pieces of driftwood. The men selected two which suited them, laid the rifles and ammunition on them, and pushing them before them, plunged into the stream and swam across. Hardly had they entered the bushes when the River Sprite appeared upon the bank, and without a moment's hesitation plunged headforemost into the stream, and did not rise again until nearly half-way across it. Then she sunk again, and when she next

appeared it was so close to the bank that a stroke or two sent her under the shadow of the bushes.

She had changed her costume somewhat since we saw her last. Her garb now was oiled buck-skin, nearly impervious to water, and stained, by the use of some unknown herb, to the hue of the forest leaves. In this garb she could swim any stream and lie undetected among the ferns, when garments of more vivid colors might have betrayed her.

Creeping on with a caution which a life in the woods had imparted, she was soon upon the trail of Eagle's Claw and the Mask, but not so near that a sudden pause or turn upon their part could put her in danger of discovery. With a patience which would have done credit to an Indian, she glided through the underbrush, halting when they did, and shrouding her form in the thick bushes, patiently awaiting their next move. The course led them to the place where the hunters had disappeared so suddenly on the day when Eagle's Claw first took the trail in pursuit of the slayer of his brother, Badger Eye. Here the trail ended abruptly, and the two avengers looked at one another in wonder and dismay.

"Is Arkansas Kit a bird, to fly in the air?" demanded Eagle's Claw. "Here is the trail, and here it ends."

"Ye bloody ould Frinchmin—ould pay-soop-'ater!" roared a voice, which was unmistakably that of Teddy.

"Aha!" screamed another. "Sacre! Old *potato-charo* Irisher. I say so!"

The sound of crashing bushes announced that a struggle had commenced, to all appearance in the earth beneath their feet. French oaths mingled with Irish proclaimed the fact that Lovie, driven to desperate deeds by the chaffing of Irish Teddy, had pitched into that worthy. This could not have happened at a more unlucky time for them, as just above them stood Eagle's Claw, his finger on his lips as a token of silence, looking at the Mask with flashing eyes. They had run the game to earth!

Cautiously approaching the bushes, the chief parted them with his hand, and attempted to peep through, but he could see nothing. Stepping a little to the right, his feet slipped from under him, and grappling at the bushes in vain to stay his downward course, the chief shot out of sight in the twin-

bling of an eye, alighting upon the head of Pete Tosser, who stood laughingly by, regarding a curious struggle between Irish Teddy and Lovie.

The Frenchman had grappled both hands into the thick, bushy hair which ornamented the top of Teddy's head, and held him in such a position that he could not help himself, although he kicked and stamped like a mad buffalo. The place in which they stood was a sort of bay running into the side of the hill, entirely shut out from sight by the bushes which grew from the sides.

Pete Tosser went down with a loud "cugh!" and the breath left his body entirely. As he afterward said, it was a "cl'ar case of suspendid animashun." As luck would have it, Jim, Kit and Weston were away, and the two injured nationalities were so much engaged with each other that they hardly realized that any one had joined them until they saw Tosser extended on the sod, while Eagle's Claw, nearly as much shocked by the fall, was feebly clutching at the knife to strike his prostrate foe.

"Lit up, ye vill'in," roared Teddy. "Look at the bloody haythen."

Lovie released his hold with a yell of terror, for he had just caught sight of the Indian. Without pausing, he bounded over the bushes with a single stag-like leap, and was off like an arrow shot from a strong bow, leaving Teddy to do what he could for his own safety. Lovie knew where to find Kit and the others, and ran like a deer for nearly a mile, where he found them in a sheltered nook near the river, engaged in the construction of a large bark canoe.

"Ah, grande ciel! he cried, panting. "Fly, messieurs; fly az ze wind of ze morning! Ze Indien 'ave come; he 'ave destroy Pete Tosser, and now he will proceed to demolish Irish Teddy!"

Without waiting to hear more the three men caught up their weapons and darted away at their utmost speed in the direction of the camp, while Lovie followed more slowly, being somewhat averse to personal combat of any kind. The others were not long in passing over the distance between them and the camp, and when they came near the sound of a struggle convinced them that Teddy was not yet con-

quered, to say the least. Darting into the bay, Arkansas Kit found two men grappled upon the sod contending for the mastery in silence, worrying each other like a pair of bull-dogs. The teeth of the Irishman were fastened on the fingers of the Indian's left hand with the tenacity of a vice, and his left hand clasped the wrist which held the knife, while his right was under the body of the savage. As Arkansas rushed in the Irishman got that hand free and dashed it with a sickening crash into the face of his adversary.

Two swift blows straight from the arm-pit and Eagle's Claw fell back senseless. As Teddy raised his hand to repeat the blows Arkansas caught him by the wrist.

"That'll do, old boy!" he said. "You've cooked his goose right peart. Let up, you heathen; don't you see that the man is senseless?"

The Milesian blood was up and it was with difficulty that they succeeded in dragging him away from the prostrate form that lay silent, the blood dripping slowly from the lacerated hand and face.

"Bring some water, Jim," cried Arkansas, as he stooped over the Indian. "See after Pete, Weston; he's got a sickener."

Jim caught up a gourd and ran to a pool near at hand, from which he dipped some water. In the mean time Kit had taken away the weapons from Eagle's Claw, and linked his feet together loosely at the ankles for he did not know but the chief might be "shamming Abraham." This done he took the gourd from Jim's hand and washed the blood from the Indian's face.

"I wouldn't like to have you hit me such a peltter, my boy," he said, looking at the senseless savage. "You've knocked the spots clear out of him."

"The devil made me mad," replied Teddy.

"How did he come here?"

"Sure, he fell down through the hool foreninst ye," replied Teddy, "an' knocked the brith out ov Pate Tesser. Me an Lovie was havin' a bit av a shindy, an' Pate was laughin', when, be my sowl, down comes me bould boy slap on the top av Pate's hid, an' down he wint. Lovie rin away like a thafe uv the wurd, an' it's meself hopped anto me foine Injun an' did the bist I ~u'd."

"You have done well, Teddy, except that you know I told ye to keep quiet, acause the Injun would take the trail an' foller us. Why in thunder didn't ye do it?"

"'Twas that spalpeen av a Lovie, Master Kit. The divil can't take a joke, an' he grabbed me by the hair. Look at me now while I bate him."

"Come back hyar, you cantankerous varmint!" cried Kit. "I won't hev no fighting in my camp, not ef I knows it. The fust man that lifts a hand hez got ter fight me, and I reckon you ain't game fur that."

"Coward, coward!" cried Teddy, pointing at Lovie. "Look til the French runaway thafe comin' back."

"Runaway! I scorn heem, begar!" replied Lovie. "I prefer ze strategy of war, ze coup d' etat, ze—"

"Runaway; coward!" bawled Teddy. "*Coop de tat* yer-silf—an' see how ye like it."

But for the interposition of Dick Weston and Jim, another struggle would nave taken place between the two, but they induced Teddy to be quiet and sent him after more water. By this time Pete Tossler was sitting up, looking rather sick at the stomach and Eagle's Claw showed some signs of life.

"Boys," said Pete Tossler, "hev I been struck by lightnin', or what?"

"What, I reckon," replied Kit, as he raised the Indian's head a little to give him air. "The chief dropped on yer head, down my trap."

"I didn't know but it mout be an airthquake," said Pete, passing his hand over the back of his neck, which felt somewhat cramped. "What ar' ye goin' ter do with the red thief; raise his ha'r?"

"I am not in the habit of murdering pris'ners, Pete."

"You be durned! What would he do with you if he caught ye? What was he a-gwine ter do with Dick no longer ago than yisterday? Don't be a fool; raise his cussid wool."

"Them's my sentiments," said Jim. "He ain't no good to keep, and his wool will do to show."

Instead of replying, Kit took out a piece of buck-skin and tied the Indian's hands behind him, for he was now trying to sit up.

"Keep still, chief," he said. "Yer up a stump, er erre on eggs is eggs. Now, boys, what mout you say 'bout this Injun?"

"I say skulp him," said Tosser, rising feebly.

"Hyar sez ditto!" cried Jim.

"What do you say, Lovie?"

"I should prefer to cut heem t'roat a leetle."

"Not a bit!" cried Teddy. "My blood is cooled now an t isn't me w'u'd murther a man in cowl'd blood."

"Look hyar!" said Tosser. "Let's leave it to Dick; he's hed the wust time with the Injun."

"Do you all agree to leave it to me?" said Dick.

Every one assented, for the advocates of death believed that, knowing how unsafe he was while the Indian lived, the young man would vote for death. But they did not know their man, and Arkansas Kit did.

"I am glad you left it to me. My plan is to keep him a close prisoner until we have done our work here, and then let him go free. The chief acts according to his lights, and really believes that I killed his brother intentionally, but you all know better than that."

This advice, though against the wishes of one half the party, was adopted. Eagle's Claw had listened to every word, and now spoke for the first time.

"Let the young white man know that Eagle's Claw is his enemy yet, and will kill him if he can."

"You hear that!" cried Tosser. "Now who sez we didn't orter kill the red beathen?"

"I say it," replied Dick; "and you agreed to leave it to me."

"Oh, I ain't goin' back on my word," said Tosser. "When the thief is lifting yer ha'r mebbe you'll be sorry—thet's all I've got ter say. Whar shill we keep him?"

"The first thing to find out is whether he were alone," said Arkansas. "Jim, you jump up thar and find out."

The hunter obeyed and was quickly out of sight among the bushes. Upon reaching the level above he looked for the trail, and quickly satisfied himself that the Indian had been accompanied by a white man, who had retreated as soon as he was satisfied that he could do nothing now in aid of his

red friend. Jim followed his trail to the edge of the timber, and then came back to report. Eagle's Claw was uneasy until he saw the hunter come back without a prisoner, for his only hope now was in the Mask, who would not leave him.

"All right," said Hammond, having heard the report. "We'll break camp, boys. I know a place that I think will tickle them some to find us out in, bet yer life. Pack up the traps, and leave me to take keer of the Injun."

Each of the party loaded himself with a portion of the camp furniture, while Kit passed a stout lariat about the arms of his prisoner, winding the other end around his own left hand.

"Now, Injun," he said, showing a revolver, "you've 'arned death easy enuff, and I know it right well, but we don't want to kill you ef we kin anyways help it. You ar' going to take a walk with me, and ef you try to git away I'll stop you with a pistol ball. Now you hear me."

The chief signified by a nod that he understood his danger.

"Jim knows whar I want to go," said the leader. "The big sycamore at the fork, you know."

Jim nodded and took the lead, Teddy, Pete, and Lovie, in the order of their names, followed, then Kit and his prisoner, while Dick Weston, with a cocked rifle, brought up the rear. Scarcely had they disappeared in the forest when the bushes parted, and the Mask looked after them.

"Twenty thousand curses on the luck," he muttered. "Who would have thought to see an Indian caught in such a trap as that? But courage, courage, Gabriel Vanner! You can now do your work alone."

He stepped forward a few paces, and stood lost in thought.

"I could kill him easy enough," he said, aloud; "but I fear that I could not escape the man-hunters. Others of his cursed race have felt my bullet, and he will be the last; but not now. I must save the chief first, if I can. The big sycamore at the fork, eh? I know something of that, and perhaps— Ha! what is that?"

The sound which startled him was the crack of a small

stick, but this was enough to put such a man upon his guard. Stooping low he darted into the bushes and waited. For ten minutes not another sound was heard, and then Madah stole softly into fair view, looking after the party of hunters. Repressing an oath with difficulty, the man sunk upon one knee, and crouching like a tiger, waited for her advance. She came on at last, and, as she arrived opposite the cover, he suddenly rose before her, his eyes gleaming with demoniac light.

"You!" he hissed. "By heaven, your doom is sealed, for you have dared to come between me and my revenge. You shall die!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE CAVE PRISON.

THE party, walking swiftly forward, crossed nearly three miles of forest before they reached the river, upon the bank of which a giant sycamore cast its broad shadow upon the sod. It was a strange, wild place, where a mountain torrent, leaping down the rocks, joined its current with the river. Here Kit halted, and borrowed a handkerchief from Dick, with which he covered the eyes of his prisoner. This done, they whirled him rapidly about two or three times, so that he lost the direction, and then went on, Pete Tosser and Kit holding him by the arms. The path they took was rugged and crooked. Three times in its course they forded a small stream and the chief lost all idea of locality.

Suddenly the atmosphere changed, and they were walking in a damp, cool place, like a deep vault. The path was rocky, and their feet splashed in little pools of cold water as they passed along.

"Light a torch," said Kit, as they paused. "We've got home at last."

The bandage was removed from the eyes of the chief, and as soon as he became accustomed to the light, he found that he was in a great cave, lit by a single torch, which shed a

strange glare upon the grim faces of his captors, gathered about him.

"I reckon *he* will do," said Kit. "Ef he knows whar he is now, he's a sharper Injun than we are in the habit of raising round about yer. Tie him up, Pete."

The chief was quickly bound, hand and foot, and pushed into a natural cavity in the wall of the cave, wide enough for him to lie at length, but not high enough to permit him to stand upright. The manner in which he was tied made escape without help a physical impossibility, for the "Davenport's" themselves could not have escaped from Pete Tosser's "hitch." The chief said not a word, but his fiery eyes did not for a moment leave the form of Arkansas Kit, whom he now hated, if that were possible, worse than he did Richard Weston.

"All safe now," said Kit. "I'll leave you boys in charge of him, while Dick and I go out to take a scout. And look hyar, Teddy, ef you and Lovie must fight, don't let me catch ye at it, thet's all. You've got us into trouble already with yer cussed foolishness."

"To the devil wid Lovie," replied Teddy. "I'll not fight wid a cowardly runaway."

"None of thet kind of tork, my boy!" said Kit. "Thet's the way you riled him afore."

"I'll not fight wid him, mavourneen," said Teddy. "Ye have my word, an' that's enough for any man."

"Teddy," said the Frenchman, the moment the steps of Dick and Kit had ceased to sound along the rocky floor, "I extend to you ze hand of friendship. I am your friend, begar, yes."

"What's the matther now, ye little thafe?" said Teddy. "Something sc'ars ye, don't it now?"

"Ah, no, parbleu, no, mon ami! But—is ze Indian securely fasten'?"

"Git away wid ye. Didn't Pate Tosser tie him, and who evir h'ard till av a man gitting out av the hitch he tied."

"Why do zey go away, and leave us alone wiz zis miscreant?" continued Lovie. "Let us take a knife and make him sure by striking him dead upon ze spot."

"I'm mightily afraid I'll have to to bate ye ag'in, Lovie

D'ye think I look like a man that w'u'd take a big butcher-knife, an' cut out the heart av a man tied hand an' fut? May the divil fly away wid ye, but that's a Frenchman's trick."

The Frenchman drew sullenly away, and sat down in such a position that he could watch every movement made by the Indian, whom he dreaded beyond measure, bound though he was. Pete Tosser and Jim Blakeslee had gone away with the others, and Lovie did not consider that they were efficient guards for so desperate a man as Eagle's Claw. But Teddy had confidence in Pete Tosser's skill in tying knots, and hardly looked at the prisoner, who lay quiet in the cavity, merely turning his eyes from time to time toward the Irishman, whose muscle he respected since the encounter of the morning.

"It's no use of being such a coward now," said Teddy; "I'm not afeard av him, aff ye was to l'ave him loose."

"Aha, no!" screamed Lovie. "He would destroy us quickly if he was to get loose."

"But he won't get loose, avick," persisted Teddy. "An' now, av ye bring up the pictur's be me sowl I'll relave ye of any loose change ye may have about yer close."

"You wish to play ze card, eh?" said Lovie. "Zat is good, zat s'all pass ze time away until ze boys come back from ze scout."

Gambling and drink are the vices which follow the border-man wherever he goes. If he has no money he bets personal property in the shape of arms, belts and traps. When these are gone he plays "on a credit," promising to make up his losses from the fruits of the next trapping season. Play is a enticing demon from whom there is no escape when the victim is once in his clutches. Teddy was such a victim, and he never lost an opportunity of winning or losing money. The two were soon deeply engaged in the mysteries of "draw poker," and Lovie, who was an adept at the game, was raking the pile every time. Busily engaged as they were, they did not pay as good heed to passing events as they ought, or they would have seen a dark figure flit silently through the cavern and disappear in the darkness.

"It's yer own luck ye have," said Teddy, with a sour look

at the Frenchman, as he raked in his last dollar on four kings when poor Teddy held four queens. "It's my belafe ye wrung in a cold deal on me."

"Ah, no, mon ami; begar, no. I deal fair every time."

"Mebbe ye did, but whin ye give me four quanes again and hould four *kings* there'll be a row in the family—d'ye hear me now? I've nothing else to put up, and sure we'll have to quit, unless ye'll lend me a stake."

Lovie shrugged his shoulders in the true Frenchman fashion and refused. Cursing him for his pecuriousness, Teddy wrapped a blanket about him, and lay down upon the stone floor, leaving Lovie to mount guard. But the Frenchman was a poor hand at watching, and not ten minutes later, in spite of his fear of the Indian, he was fast asleep, and snore answered snore from the sleeping "guards." At this moment a light, active figure stole in from the darkness, and Teddy awoke to find a cloth saturated with some narcotic pressed tightly upon his mouth and nostrils, while the point of a sharp instrument could be felt above his heart. He did not attempt to struggle, and in a moment his head fell back, and he was senseless. Darting from him to Lovie, the stranger applied the drugged handkerchief, and Lovie yielded to its influence.

To bind them hand and foot was the work of a moment, and then the intruder took the torch from the niche and looked about him. The light he held revealed the form of the "Mask."

"All right, so far," he muttered. "Now for Eagle's Claw."

The chief, who had been waiting to see who the intruder was, now called to him, and turning toward the niche, the Crowfoot was soon at liberty.

"Shall we take their scalps?" demanded the chief, looking at the prostrate men.

"No," replied the Mask. "The chances are against our escape, and if we killed these men and were taken after it, we should have no hope. Come on."

The chief followed him, only stopping to pick up his own weapons, which had been brought to the cave by Arkansas Kit.

"How did my brother find me so soon?" demanded the chief.

"It was the merest luck," replied the Mask. "This cave is one of my old haunts, and hearing the hunters speak of a hiding-place near the big sycamore at the forks, I thought of this place and came to it direct. Let us once get safe out of it, and let the scoundrels enter it, and they shall never come out alive."

"It is good; we will watch like snakes in the grass, and kill those we hate."

"I have a better plan than that," replied the Mask. "Keep quiet, and let us get out before they return, if possible."

They were hurrying through long passages, dark, intricate, and difficult; creeping through places just wide enough to permit a single person to pass, stooping, and had reached a small room full of scattered bowlders, when they heard the voices of men directly in front. Crouching behind the rocks, each with a revolver in his hand, they waited anxiously, for they knew that it was some of the white party coming back. Nearer and nearer they came, and as one of them carried a torch, to the surprise of Eagle's Claw, they carried between them the senseless figure of a woman, the water dripping from her long hair.

Eagle's Claw would have raised his head to look more closely, but the restraining hand of the Mask was laid upon his shoulder, and the four men, carrying their burden, disappeared in the narrow passage.

The moment they were out of sight the Mask sprang up and hurried toward the mouth of the cave, closely followed by the chief, and ten minutes later, they crept out of a narrow opening, just wide enough for the passage of a man, and stood in the open air.

"My brother has kept his word, and has indeed been true to Eagle's Claw," said the chief, as he drew a deep breath. "A Crowfoot does not feel good when he has bonds upon his hands. It is not right that a chief should be so humiliated."

"I would have risked my life for you," replied the Mask. "Did you see the woman those men carried?"

"I could not see her face."

"Then you do not know who it was, chief. It was Madah!"

"Ha!"

"She loves this Dick Weston, the man who killed your brother."

An expression of terrible rage came into the dark face of Eagle's Claw.

"Let this Weston die," continued the tempter, "and she will not care what becomes of her. This morning, after you were taken, while I was on the watch, I discovered her following me and caught her."

"It was well; why did she follow you?"

"To watch these villains, and to warn them of our movements."

"Ha! If a Crowfoot woman did this she should die."

"Then listen, chief! When this girl, for whom I have done so much, attempted to betray me, I forgot the blood which was in her veins, and—"

"You killed her!"

"I dragged her with me to the waterside. She struggled, and to save myself I struck her, and she fell into the water. That is all I know."

"Eagle's Claw loved Madah, and would have made her his wife. Do you think she is dead?"

"I don't know; she fell into the river and sunk—that is all I know about it. But enough of her—let us set to work."

"What will my brother do?"

"I am going to close up the entrance to this cave, and starve these villains."

"My brother forgets that Madah is with them. If you close it, *she* must starve, too."

"I don't care whether she lives or dies," replied the Mask, impatiently.

"My brother must not forget that he has promised to give Madah to Eagle's Claw, and that, if she lives, he will claim her. We can close it enough so that they can not come out, and then make them set Madah free," said the chief.

"Any thing, so that we shut them up."

It was not a laborious undertaking. The ground about

them was thickly strewn with bowlders as large as a man could lift, and in a half-hour's time they closed the entrance, with the exception of a place just large enough for a man to force himself through. But they knew the hunters too well to suppose that they would undertake such a thing as that.

It was now late in the afternoon, and the two sat down near the entrance of the cave and waited. An hour passed and then a heavy body was heard to fall against the obstruction they had placed in the way, and a muffled oath was heard.

"Thunder and lightning!" cried the same voice. "Come hyar, Pete. We're in a trap, I sw'ar by the big horn spoon."

"What's up, Kit?" cried Pete Tosser.

"The door is blocked up," roared Kit, "and it's bin done in the last hour, too."

"Yes, you villain," cried the Mask, "you *are* in a trap, and I have put you there. Ask Dick Weston what he thinks of running Gabriel Vanner to earth, now? You will starve—starve in the darkness, with no help. I laugh at you as you die."

"I hear you, Gabe Vanner," screamed Dick Weston. "I can't die until I have avenged the murder of my brothers and my father."

"Ho! ho! ho! You chased Gabriel Vanner from New Orleans to St. Louis, from St. Louis to Vicksburg, from Vicksburg to Natchez Under-the-Hill, from Natchez to Galveston, from Galveston to Santa Fe, Mexico, St. Jo, and Little Rock. And last of all, when you had hunted me from pillar to post, I have you in my power. What do you think of vengeance, now?"

"Red-handed villain! A new murder is on your soul. The girl who had devoted her life to you lies dead in yonder cave and your hand struck her down; she lived long enough to tell us that."

"Let her die!" cried the murderer. "The moment I knew she wanted to save your life I hated her. Let her die—you may die too—and I'll go back and claim the property. Ho! ho! ho! How does that suit you?"

"Don't waste breath on him, boy," said Arkansas Kit. "He's got us in sech a trap ez we kain't break out of, but

don't let him hear us cry about it, you know, that's too much."

The villain who called himself Gabriel Vanner strove in every way to attract their attention or draw a word from them. The silence of the grave on their part attested that they had taken Hammond's advice. What were they doing? He knew them too well to think that they would yield quietly to their fate; Arkansas Kit was not the man to do that, and doubtless he was already studying a plan for escape.

Night came and they were still watching before the entrance, when a wild, startled cry from Vanner made the chief look up, and there, standing upon a lofty rock, was the figure of Madah, the moonlight glistening on her dripping hair, while a flickering finger pointed at Gabriel Vanner's pallid face. "Murderer," cried a voice which sounded fearfully in the solemn place, "your race is nearly run."

Vanner covered his face with his hands to shut out the awful sight.

CHAPTER XII.

A RED STORY.

KNOWING that the two men outside the cave would not soon relax their vigilance, the prisoners—for such they might aptly be called—leaving Pete Tosser to watch at the blocked-up entrance, ran back hastily to the inner cavern, where they found Teddy crouching sullenly against the wall, utterly cast down by the run of bad luck which seemed to follow him lately, and Lovie holding his own aching head in his hands in the opposite corner. The two had, in a measure, recovered from the stupefying effects of the chloroform, but their heads still felt its influence.

"Don't spake to me, byes," roared Teddy. "I'll have the life of that man that dares to spake till me. Sure my hid is split intil a huntherd paces."

"That's the cussid chloroform," said Kit. "How is the gal gittin' on?"

"Sorra one o' me knows," said Teddy. "She's over beyant, where ye put her."

Kit stepped hastily to the place where he had laid Madah down and uttered a cry of surprise, as he saw that she was gone.

"She's off, Dick. Thunder and lightning—this is a pooty kittle of fish!"

"I thought she was dead," said Dick, in a hushed voice. "How could she go away, weak as she was?"

"Sometimes people hev unnat'ral strength giv' 'em," said Kit. "She's gone, sure ez thunder, and now I'd jest like ter ask ye *whar* she's gone. She couldn't pass us, and the door is blocked up."

"I know that," replied Dick. "Perhaps she was crouching behind the rocks somewhere, waiting for a chance to escape. But yet, it seems strange that she should go back to the man who tried to murder her."

"He ain't her father, nuther," said Kit. "Don't tork ter me! Thet gal never c'u'd hev sech a father ez this Gabe Vanner. Oh, ain't he a devil's baby, the mean cuss!"

"Do you see any chance of getting out, Kit? I'd take any risk for a blow at Gabe Vanner—the villainous murderer. He's my uncle too, the low thief, but he hated our family because, while he had squandered his estates, at the card table, my father grew richer, day by day. He killed them all, and I'll tell you how.

"I was only a lad of fifteen when this happened, but I remember it as clearly as if it were yesterday. My oldest brother left the plantation to go to New Orleans, not thirty miles distant. He never came back, and three days after his body was found in the Mississippi, with a bullet through the brain. We laid it to the 'River Pirates,' and search was made but it resulted in nothing.

"Three months later my next brother made the same journey and shared the same fate. There seemed to be some great danger for our family on that New Orleans road, but when brother Jack's body was found, my father, usually a quiet man, broke out into deadly rage, and cursed the name of Gabriel Vanner as the author of his sorrow. Then he seized a pair of dueling pistols and took the road for Van-

ner's house, the only thing that remained to him of his father's broad estates. The place was run down dreadfully and the weeds were growing up on what had been a spacious lawn, and father rode in at the broken gate. I followed, mounted on my little pony.

" 'Stop here, Richard,' said my father, sternly, 'and do not attempt to follow me any further.'

" He went up to the door, leaving his horse with me, and rapped. A quadroon woman—the only slave Vanner had and a malicious devil she was, too—opened the door.

" 'Where is Gabriel Vanner?' my father asked.

" 'What do you want of him?'

" 'Look you, my girl,' said father; 'be very careful how you address me or it may be the worse for you. Where is your master?'

" 'He's down by the fifteen-acre field, close to the lake,' said the girl, sullenly. 'That's all I know about it.'

" 'I shall find him,' said father, turning away. She muttered to herself something which I did not fully hear, about my father finding him too soon, and father leaped the fence in the rear of the house and went down through the bushes. I tied the horses and sneaked after him on foot, for I thought a duel was coming off, and, boy-like, I wanted to see it. Guided by voices after he reached the woods, my father reached the shore of a little lake and found Vanner and two rough-looking fellows who were more than suspected of being land-pirates, talking together on the lake shore.

" 'I tell you no!' Vanner was saying; 'he will never suspect us.'

" 'That is a lie, Gabriel,' said my father, stepping out of the bushes. 'I do suspect you grievously indeed, and accuse you of the murder of two as noble boys as ever trod the earth.'

" Vanner started up, pale as death, and the desperate ruffians drew their pistols:

" 'Careful, careful, boys,' said my father. 'Don't draw your weapons until your turn comes, for at present my business is with this red-handed scoundrel who calls himself a connection of my family. Now, Gabriel, what have you got to say to me?'

“ ‘I don't know what you mean by coming here with such an accusation,’ said Vanner. ‘I know nothing of your brats.’

“ ‘You would not be benefited by their death, I suppose,’ said my father. ‘You of course are unaware, that by my father's will, failing heirs in a direct line on our side, the property goes to you at my death. You have never thought of that and traded on it; oh no!’

“ ‘Come; put your accusation into force, Ralph Weston,’ said Vanner. ‘Of what do you accuse me?’

“ ‘Of the murder of my sons.’

“ ‘You lie! Shall I follow that by striking you in the face, or will you fight here and now?’

“ Most noble murderer! cried my father; ‘I came prepared for it, and have brought my pistols. There is no better place than this, and if you kill me fairly, there only stands a feeble boy between you and the prize you covet. But you are not going to kill me.’

“ Those two ruffians acted as seconds, and each took a loaded pistol in his hand to see fair play. My father took his place without a murmur, and accepted the pistol handed him. He was too honorable himself to doubt that this was to be a fair duel. One of the villains began to count, and the pistols came up to a level, but at the word two, those three scoundrels fired at my father. He spun half round and shot the man who was giving the word through the heart, and turning again, staggered a step or two and fell upon his face. It was a cowardly murder, and yet these men exulted in it, and agreed to swear that it was a fair and honorable duel between my father and Vanner.

“ I saw that I could do nothing now, and stole away to raise the country on them. I had not far to ride, and in an hour was back with thirty men at my back, eager to be in at the lynching of Gabe Vanner. But, when we searched for him we could not find him, and from that day to this he has not been seen in that parish.

“ I was only a boy, but from that hour I registered a vow of vengeance. My mother, who dreaded lest Gabriel should take my life, sent me to school in the North, and from that to Yale. I graduated and came home, and found my mother dying, and my sister and I were alone. From that hour to

this I have hunted Gabriel Vanner from one city to another, and now, instead of avenging my father's murder, I am in his power."

"Don't say that yit, my boy," said Arkansas Kit. "I'm the boy that never gives up fur a trifle, and whar thar is life thar is hope. It don't seem to run in the keerds thet this skunk is goin' ter wipe me out, and— Thunder! thar's the gal!"

As he spoke, Madah glided slowly among them, and sat down at Dick Weston's knee. She was very pale, and her fingers opened and closed in a strange, convulsive way, seen only in those whose brains are turned, and there was a wandering smile ever on her face.

"I have seen the dead come out of their graves to mock me, Dick," she said, sliding her little hand into his. "Fathers that kill daughters who have been good to them are wicked; don't you think so?"

"Do you see this?" cried Dick, in agony. "The poor girl is mad!"

"Mad, mad? Oh no, Dick; you are wrong. My eyes are open now and I can see more clearly. I am the River Sprite, and my home is in the Arkansas. It was wicked in me to come among men of mortal mold."

Arkansas Kit uttered a strange cry, and caught the hands of the afflicted girl in both his own.

"Keep back, Dick Weston!" he cried. "Ef she hed kept her serses I'd never have spoken, but now my heart is too full. I love her. I have loved her all the time, and my hand shall guard her through life."

"You?" cried Dick. "Don't forget yourself, Kit Hammond. Do you think because she is afflicted that I shall desert her? There; don't let us quarrel, old boy. Let the girl choose between us now and forever, and the one who wins shall guard her as a sacred treasure all his life long."

"I kain't ask no fairer than thet, boy," said Kit, quietly. "Let the gal choose. Madah, one of us two, ef we live, will take keer of you while you stay on 'arth; we want you to say who you will live with."

"There are more kind people in the world than I thought," said Madah, wonderingly. "I am afraid my brain is weak,

and I shall not choose right. Kit is good and Dick is good—but—I love Dick the best. I will stay with him."

"She's made her ch'ice," said Kit, mournfully. "Old boy, I b'ar no malice. I kain't do thet, nohow, but ef the time ever comes when you tire of her, or neglect her, look out fur me. I'll hev her out'n yer hands ef it takes my life! I'll stand by you, and see you safe through this, ef I kin. What did the gal say about fathers thet murder the'r darters?"

"He is up yonder," she said, raising her hand. "How pale he turned and how his knees shook when he saw my face."

"Where did you see him?"

"I won't tell you now. I am sleepy and must rest. How can I talk when my brain whirls round so, and I see sparks of fire?"

She rested her head confidently against Dick's knee, and fell into a tranquil, childlike slumber; her lover sat looking into her face, and for a while forgot that any other person lived upon the earth. Hammond could not bear to see this, and hurrying away into the darkest part of the cavern, he wrapped his blanket about him and lay down to rest, but he could not sleep. Jim Blakeslee stood guard, Lovie and Teddy slept, and Dick still sat supporting the head of the girl he loved upon his knee, and watching her with a mute, adoring gaze. Thus they waited calmly for the coming of the morning, when they would try to escape, if indeed escape was possible.

Fatigue at last overcame Dick Weston; his head dropped against the wall and he fell asleep. In the dead hour of night Madah slipped silently away from him and darted into the darkness at the rear of the cave. Jim Blakeslee saw her and darted after her, with a cry of alarm which brought Kit to his feet, and snatching the torch from the wall, he followed Jim. In the corner where she was last seen there was a large projecting stalactite, and between this and the wall was a narrow passage which none of them had seen before.

"Hyar we are, boys!" cried Kit. "By the livin' Jinks, I believe the gal is going to show us the way out'n this cussed hole! Thar she goes; keep her in sight, but don't chase her too close or she mout get skeered."

What had prompted Madah to start up so suddenly and leave them? Who can fathom the mysterious workings of a distempered mind? She fled along through narrow passages, and they followed her, but all at once she disappeared like a spirit, and they stood looking wildly in each other's faces, for the bare walls of the passage showed no place where she could have passed through. They were completely at fault.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE NOBLE RIVALS.

WHILE these events were transpiring within the cavern, their enemies had not been idle. We have seen how the sudden appearance of Madah had affected them, and no wonder, for each man thought he looked on a vision from the grave. She disappeared as she had come, leaving the two nearly frantic with fear.

"Hugh!" said Eagle's Claw, "Madah is angry with my brother, and we have heard a voice from the grave."

Gabriel Vanner manned himself by a violent effort and shook off his fear.

"Bah!" he said. "Let us be men and bear in mind that if we *have* seen a vision, it can do us no harm. We are men and need not fear a shadow."

"Eagle's Claw has been taught that we must fear the spirits when they come to us out of the grave," said the Indian, with a shudder.

"All the devils from the pit shall not drive me from my work!" hissed Gabriel Vanner. "Do you forget that the murderer of your brother is here, and that you can stand and hear his dying groans?"

"Eagle's Claw had forgotten; he is a man again," said the chief. "What shall we do?"

"The girl is gone, and we need no longer fear for *her*. Let us wall up the entrance so that the devil himself could not burrow out."

Working like demons, in the moonlight, they piled up the bowlders until escape seemed to be impossible. It would have taken days of work from the inside to remove the stones which they heaped up. At last, wearied out by their exertions, they sat down to rest, with triumphant faces. They had sealed up their enemies in a living grave.

"So far good!" said Vanner. "They will never get out of that hole now, and I would give a year of my life to be where I could listen to their dying groans."

A low exclamation from the chief interrupted him, and following the direction of his pointing finger he saw Madah standing on the rocks above him.

"Ha ha! ha!" she screamed. "They do their fiendish work and forget that there is One above who watches over the innocent. Murderer! Your fate shall find you out."

"Away!" cried Vanner, covering his eyes with his open palms. "You brought your fate upon yourself."

"The Great Spirit is angry," said Eagle's Claw, trembling. "Let us go away and leave these men in their grave."

"Never!" cried Gabriel Vanner. "Here I wait for nine days, until I am certain that my enemy is dead. Fool! this is no spirit, but a living woman, as I will prove to you. Stay you to watch the entrance and let me follow her."

He bounded up the rocks in pursuit of Madah, who fled through the mountain paths with the fleetness of the deer, and disappeared suddenly in a dark crevice, and he saw her no more. Into this crevice a stream of water leaped and disappeared, dropping to a depth of twenty or twenty-five feet, and he turned back, almost inclined to believe that he had indeed seen a spirit from the other world.

We left the adventurous band in the bosom of the eternal hills, on the trail of the River Sprite, who had so strangely vanished. The face of Arkansas Kit was a study. In his rude way he adored the fair girl, and the adventurous and wandering life she led had made her character seem more noble to him. Yet, in the heart of this borderman there was implanted a noble spirit which would not suffer him to interfere with one whom he deemed a friend, and he believed that the girl loved Richard Weston.

After a walk of half an hour they came to a place where a thin sheet of water trickled over the limestone, falling with a dull murmur into a deep hole, which the constant dropping had worn in the bottom of the cavern. The wonder, in regard to this rocky cavity, was this: that while the water bubbled up nearly to the top, it never overflowed. Some unseen outlet carried the water away as fast as it dropped into the cavity.

"This yer seems to end it," said Kit, as he looked about him. "Whar mout the gal be gone now?"

They looked carefully about them, but could find no sign.

"This looks strange," said Dick. "I must own that I am puzzled to comprehend it."

"So be I," said Kit. "Thar ain't no way she could git out, unless she went up through the waterfall."

"By heaven, she must have gone that way," cried Dick. "As I live, there is a fragment of her dress upon the rock."

Kit followed the direction of his pointing finger, and saw a small strip of green buck-skin, dangling from a point of rock near the point where the water came out of the limestone.

"Hold the torch while I go up," said Kit, eagerly. "Cuss every rock in the mighty hills, ef thar ain't suthin' hyar we don't understand."

Dick took the torch and held it, while Kit clambered up the rocks to the point where the water came out, when he uttered a cry of joy and called out to Dick to come up.

"Sing out to the rest of the boys, too," he cried. "May I never see the back of my he'd, ef we ain't goin' out of this ez a caterpillar climbs a tree."

Dick shouted, and the rest of the party, who had been following, came up immediately.

"I'll be bu'sted ef I don't see the path ez cl'ar ez noon-day, boys," cried Kit. "Come up hyar, every livin' thief among ye; thar's plenty of room."

The men climbed up, one by one, until they stood together upon a rocky shelf, over which the water flowed in a thin sheet, not more than two or three inches deep. The water

issued from an arched opening, higher than a man's head, and stepping into this they could see the blue sky through the thin sheet of water dancing down from above their heads.

"All clear!" cried Kit. "Now, ef them two cusses ain't dug out, won't I make it sort o' lively fur them! Oh, no, ska'cely; I guess not!"

The first care was to guard the ammunition from the spray of the waterfall; this done, they began the ascent of the tunnel, and directly after, they stood, safe and sound, upon the crest. Woe to Eagle's Claw and Gabriel Vanner if they met now!

The villainous Mask had not remained long staring into the cleft in which Madah had disappeared, for he was somewhat affected by the manner in which she came and went. He returned at once to the mouth of the cave.

"The little devil!" hissed Vanner, "let me once get my hands on her, and I'll lay her ghost so that she won't come out of the grave I make her in a hurry."

"My brother is a hard man," said Eagle's Claw. "I am an Indian, but I am sorry for Madah. She had a good heart, she was beautiful, and Eagle's Claw loved her well."

"She deserved her fate, curse her," replied Vanner, grating out the words through his set teeth. "I'll know what *this* means before long, for I am not the one to believe in ghosts. There is some trick about it."

"Does the Deadly Hand think that Madah is alive?" cried the chief, eagerly.

"Of course I do; she got out of the river, in some way, and is trying to frighten us away. But I will not leave this spot until I am sure that they are dead."

"You will wait long fer that!" cried a harsh voice. "Look up, you skunk of misery—look up!"

He knew the voice; it was that of Arkansas Kit, and turning his blazing eyes up the rocks they had lately descended, he saw the whole party he had supposed safely entombed within the rocks, and four deadly rifles were leveled at the pair:

"Euchered!" cried Kit. "You kain't see our play, kin yo! You'd better 'pass the buck.'"

"Hold on!" said Vanner, throwing up his hand. "You've got us; now what do you want?"

"We want ye to stand thar till we come down," replied Kit. "Thar's a small trifle of business to settle atween you an' me, now you jest bet yer bottom dollar. Ef they move hand or foot, Pete, you an' Jim plug away. You ain't no ways likely to miss."

"I reckon *not*," said Pete Tosser. "Thet ain't our little game, you understand; don't suit our book, so to speak."

Kit descended the rocks, rapidly followed by Dick Weston. They had laid their rifles and pistols on the rocks above, and were only armed with knife and hatchet.

"Drop yer shooters, gentlemen!" said Kit. "You kin see we ha'in't got nun. This is gwine ter be a fa'r fight, man to man. My pard takes you—I take the Injun. Ain't thet fa'r, boys?"

"Yes," replied Vanner, bitterly, "and if we conquer, your friends will shoot us down."

"No, they won't! They've made a solemn promise to give ye three hours' start, an' arter thet, they'll shoot ye on sight."

"It is good!" said Eagle's Claw. "Arkansas Kit is a good man, and would be just, even to an Indian. What shall we fight with?"

"Knife an' hatchet."

"I think you may as well take off your mask, Gabe Vanner," said Weston in a tone of bitter hate. "I want to see your face as you die."

"We shall see who is to die," replied Vanner, flinging aside his mask, and revealing the face of a man little more than forty years of age—a cold, cruel face, full of cunning, and seamed by crime. He had thrown away his pistols at the command of Pete Tosser, and now drew his bowie, with a flourish which showed that he was a complete master of his weapon.

"You would have done well to choose some other weapon, my boy," he said, coldly. "Since you will have it, I will send the last of a cursed race to his long home."

Pete Tosser and the rest, now having come down, took possession of the fire-arms, and stood coolly awaiting the issue of the fray.

"Hold on a minnit, chief," said Kit. "You an' I admire to see a fight, so let's keep still and see how this comes out. Now then, no more crowing, but pitch in!"

Weston and Vanner did not need a second bidding, and in an instant their weapons clashed together, their eyes glaring mutual hate. Gabriel Vanner proved that he had not boasted in vain, but he had a foeman worthy of his steel. That broad, twelve inch blade formed a wall around him, so rapidly did it encircle his form as he fought. Three times they closed, and upon the third encounter, Vanner dropped his knife and fell bleeding at the feet of his enemy.

"Good enuff," said Kit. "Boyee, you did that up right peart, an' I'm proud to name ye fur a friend. Now, chief s'pose we settle our little diffikilty."

Eagle's Claw was ready. Glancing at the prostrate form of Vanner, bleeding to death at his feet, he drew his knife and awaited the rush of Arkansas Kit. But the young borderer was an old Indian-fighter, and for three or four minutes the two circled about each other, waiting for a chance, the deadly knife ready to do its bloody work. Relentless as death, they circled on, and when they closed, it was with the intention to end the strife quickly. The click of the knives was as rapid as the play of swords, and Kit was pressing the chief hard when his bowie, which had been sprung in a late struggle, snapped short at the hilt, and a groan broke from the lips of Dick Weston, for he thought the brave scout at the mercy of the chief. But Arkansas dashed his knife-hilt into the face of Eagle's Claw with such force that he reeled blindly back, and before he could recover himself, his knife hand was closely locked in that of Kit.

Kit was one of the best wrestlers in the West, and the moment the struggle was reduced to a question of muscle, the Indian was doomed. Kit put on a toe-lock, and before the chief could recover himself, he lay prostrate on the sod, wounded and conquered.

"Tie him, some one," said Arkansas Kit. "My wind is all gone."

Pete Tosser tied the chief, and Kit leaned against a tree, panting for breath. At this moment Madah sprung down from the rocks above them, and kneeled beside the dying

Vanner. She evidently was sane enough now. That terrible scene had recalled her wandering wits.

"Away!" he screamed. "I curse you with my dying breath; but for you this dog would have died long ago. But, bear witness all: this is not my child. My blood does not run in her veins, for she is the daughter of my second wife, from whom I stole her when a child three years old, because my wife defied me. She was a widow, and her name was Bassett. Millicent Bassett is the name of the girl, whom I hate now as I hated her mother. I tried to kill her, last night, but fate was against me. I'll have my revenge on you, Dick Weston. You think she loves you, but—ha! ha! ha! *Vive la mort!*"

And with a bubbling groan upon his lips he fell dead. His troubled and stormy life was at an end. Dick Weston stood for a moment, looking gloomily down at the man at his feet.

"Good-by to you, Gabriel Vanner!" he said. "The blood of my kindred is atoned for. May the Master of Life forgive your sins on earth, if it is His will. Millicent—I must call you that now—what did he mean when he said that I *thought* you loved me?"

A roseate flush stole up into the brown cheek of the girl, but she did not speak.

"Understand me, dear one," said Dick. "I love you dearly, and offer you my hand and heart. Arkansas Kit loves you as well, and if you make your choice, neither of us will be the other's enemy. We have shaken hands upon that."

"You are noble-hearted men," said Millicent, in her clear, sweet voice, "and any girl might be proud of such lovers. I know that I must have a protector, for I am alone in the world—and it shall be one of you two."

Kit took a single step, and stood by the side of Dick Weston. His brown cheek had blanched, and a sort of trembling passed through every limb. Millicent advanced and looked at the two intently.

"It is a hard task," she said, "for I must give pain to one of you, yet the other will have my undying esteem. If I marry Mr. Weston he gives me a name and station in the

world. If I choose Kit Hammond he will give me the life I am best fitted to share—the life of the border. I have made my election, and I choose—here.”

And she gave both hands, with a royal gesture, full of grace and love, to—Arkansas Kit!

The noble hunter uttered a low, delighted cry, and caught her to his breast, while Weston staggered as if he had received a blow in the heart, and covered his face with his hands, while Pete Tosser, who had been secretly eager for this result, uttered an Indian war-whoop, and caught Jim Blakeslee in his arms, while Teddy, not to be outdone, seized the Frenchman by the hair, and literally lifted him from his feet, with a Tipperary yell!

Millicent, the River Sprite no more, disengaged herself from the arms of Arkansas Kit, and approached Dick Weston. That brave man was struggling with himself and conquered—a noble victory. He gave one hand to Millicent and the other to Kit, each with a fervent pressure.

“You have chosen wisely, Millicent,” he said, “and I will keep my word. Kit, old boy, no man ever deserved this blessing half so much, and I can forget my own disappointment as I think that I have been beaten by a brave man. Give you joy, old fellow, and many years of happiness with this noble woman by your side.”

Then, what a royal cheer went up as the hunters crowded about in fervent congratulation at the victory of their loved companion, and the noble way in which Dick received his own own ill success.

They made a grave for Gabriel Vanner where he fell, and taking their canoes at the river, they went down to their old camp and waited for the night. They took the chief with them, and when night came on glided down the stream, and morning found them far away from all danger from the Crowfoot tribe, and the canoes were beaded in to the shore, where all landed.

“Chief,” said Arkansas Kit, “we order kill ye, acause ye’ve been a cruel enemy to us—a bitter, hard one to deal with.”

“Eagle’s Claw can die,” replied the Crowfoot, proudly. “He is ready to die. But look, Arkansas Kit, the chief is sorry

for he thinks, now, that the young white man did not try to kill the chief's brother."

"I did not, indeed," replied Dick.

"I'm too happy to shed any more blood," said Kit, "and I'm going to leave it all with Milly. Say, gal, what shall be done with the chief?"

Without a word, Millicent stepped to the side of the captive and cut his bonds.

"You are free Eagle's Claw," she said. "I know that you are too noble a man to do us harm after we have given you life."

"The white girl has spoken," replied the Crowfoot. "Eagle's Claw is the friend of all here, and will seek blood no more."

They gave him back his arms, and left him standing upon a grassy point, watching the canoes as they glided away. They saw him no more.

Few words are needed now. Our friends reached Little Rock, after many days, and the whole party were witnesses of the ceremony which made Kit Hammond and Millicent Bassett man and wife. Here they parted—Dick Weston for his home, and Kit to find the relatives of his wife, if any yet lived. To their joy, Mrs. Vanner was easily found, and received her daughter as one raised from the dead.

Dick Weston lived a bachelor some years, but at last was caught by a pretty widow in Natchez. Every year they visit Little Rock, and the two wives keep each other company, while their husbands are out on the plains, hunting. And when they make up a party, Pete Tosser and Jim Blakeslee are sure to be among them, for they are proud to call themselves the friends of Arkansas Kit. Lovie and Teddy still live and quarrel whenever they meet, as in the old days.

Reader, the story is told.

THE END.

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